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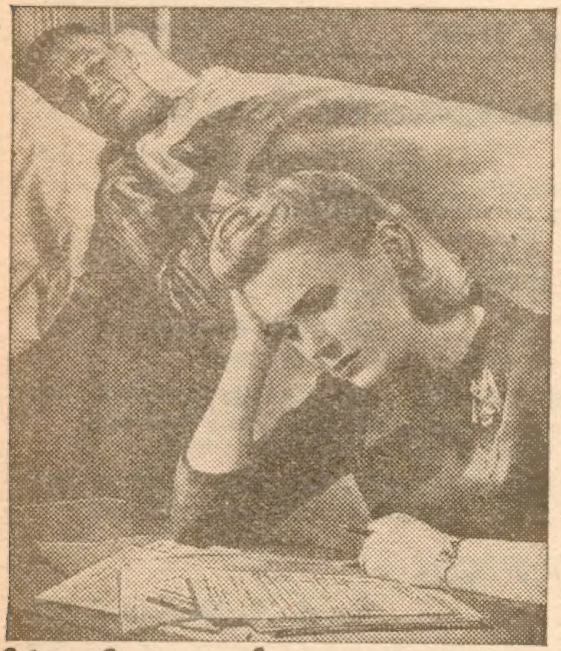

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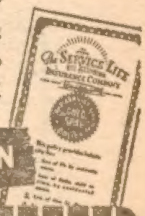

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Cover by A. Leslie Ross — *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor*

Volume 11 — **August, 1945** — **Number 2**

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Red Hamilton had worked with Black Jack Driscoll before, cleaning up hell-roaring towns. But when he came to Drove City, the situation was different — and with a deadly difference!

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When all efforts to conciliate fail, then all efforts to crush are in order!

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Jim Fletcher wanted to get married, but his tactics against Pete Gelden were such as to make his prospective bride wonder if the hombre had gone loco!

LAUGH THROUGH GUNSMOKE, CLOWN! **By Lee Floren** **91**

Even a rodeo clown can't find any humor in cold-blooded murder being planned!

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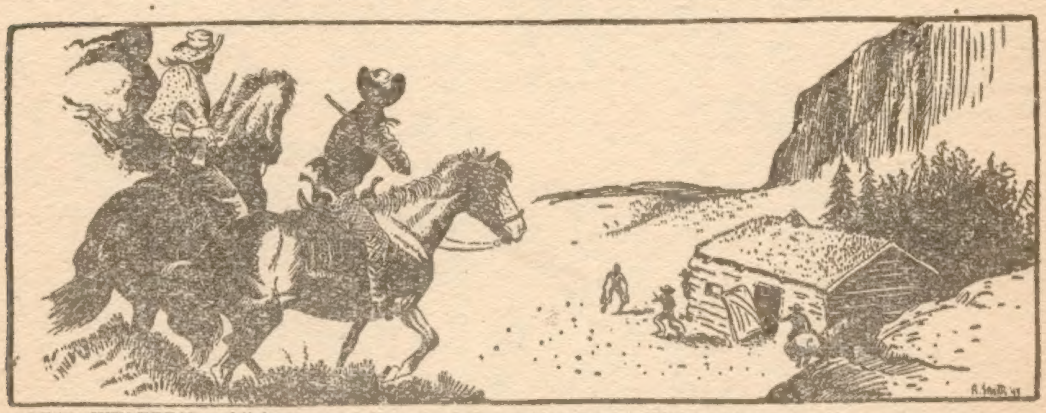

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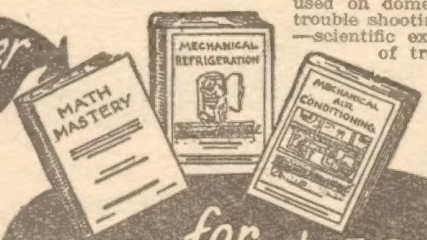

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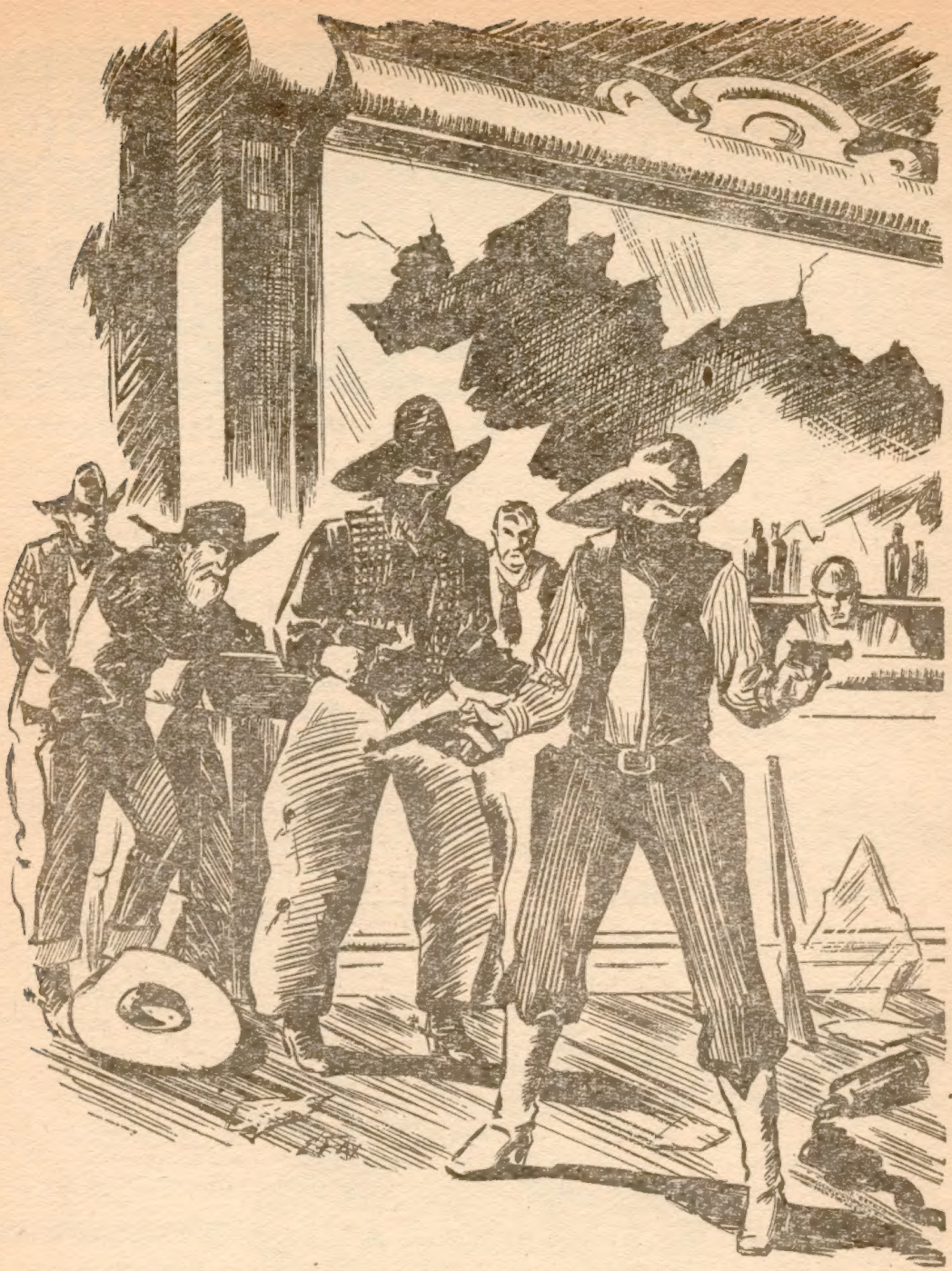

TRAIL TOWN

When Red Hamilton came to Drove City in response to a letter from his oldtime partner in lobo-killing, Black Jack Driscoll, he expected to find a hell-roaring town to clean up. And he was right — about Drove City!

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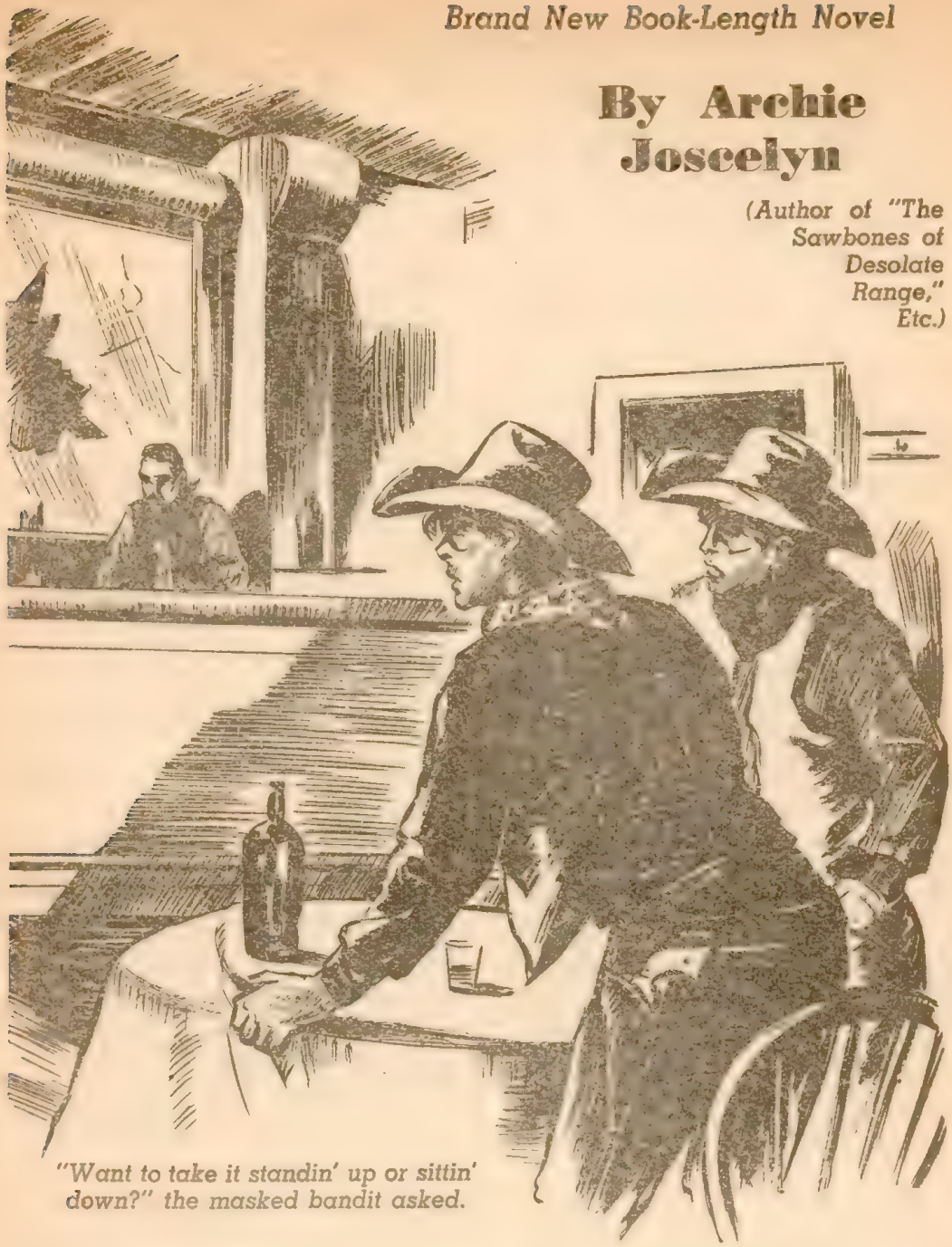

"Want to take it standin' up or sittin' down?" the masked bandit asked.

CHAPTER I

THIS WAS the Trail, and there was no mistaking it. Here it was narrow, little more than a quarter of a mile in width, though at other points it was miles across. Taken in its entirety, it ran like a giant belt laid down across a thousand miled of country. Everywhere, where the hoofs of the trampling herd had trod, it was easy to read, unmistakable.

Red Hamilton knew it for what it was. Right now there happened to be a lull at this section of the great trail, and for as far as eye could reach there was no herd in sight, nor dust of a herd. But that was not the usual thing. He had seen the great road when a man might top a rise and pick out a dozen herds, each one

averaging two thousand head of Texas cattle bound for the grass of Wyoming or Montana. And without moving his horse, the same watcher might discern the dust of half as many more herds, beyond the easy line of vision. Herds which moved with only a gap of a mile or less between.

Right now, save for himself, and the two horsemen who jogged toward him, the trail was empty. Red eyed the newcomers curiously. From all the signs, he should be close to Drove City and journey's end. Which was just as well, for he was beginning to crave some action again.

And, if he had read Black Jack Driscoll's letter aright, that was what would be waiting, in Drove City. He and Jack had been together through two years of war, marching with Sherman. For a year after that, Red had lost touch with Jack, and then they had come together at a little frontier town called Snowshoe.

It had been a tough, roaring town, and the two of them had tamed it, Red wearing the marshal's star, Black Jack acting as his deputy. A man had to be tough and know how to use guns or fists in such a town. Snowshoe had been tamed. And now—Drove City.

The two horsemen were coming up now. One was tall, with a puckered face. The right cheek seemed to be drawn together around a diamond-shaped scar, as though an old wound had healed without benefit of medico. It gave him a sardonic, almost satanic look, enhanced by heavy eyebrows above a hawk-like nose.

His companion was shorter, more compactly built. A man who wore gloves—not the usual big gauntleted gloves, but skin-tight short gloves, black in color, which contrasted strangely with the white skin of wrists and the pallidness of his face that sunshine and wind seemed unable to temper.

Both wore two guns, and carried rifles in saddle-sheaths. The puckered-cheeked man hailed him.

"You'll be Red Hamilton, I take it—headin' for Drove City and Black Jack Driscoll. He said we'd know you easy. A big man, red-headed, wearin' a red gun belt. I'm Diamond. This's Whitey."

"I'm Red," Hamilton acknowledged. "What's going on, that Black Jack sends out a reception committee? Does he think I couldn't find the town?"

"Nothin' like that, Red." Diamond laughed, a grating sound. "Black Jack just thought it'd be hospitable. Besides, we want to show you somethin' first, off a little. Be only a mile or so out of our way, and save a trip back later on."

Red shrugged. There was something funny here, but if Black Jack wanted it that way, it didn't matter. Heading west of the trail, they swung at once into rolling, rich grass country, where the trampling herds had not set foot.

"I see you pack a rifle, too," Whitey said significantly.

"That's a relic of old habit," Red confessed. "Army trainin' is hard to get away from."

Diamond gave his short bark of a laugh again.

"I didn't get no army trainin'," he said. "But it sure behooves a man to go well heeled in this country. I never did like it for somebody to be able to shoot farther'n I could."

"You sound as if there was a lot of trouble down this way."

"You said it, feller. And what there has been, ain't a patchin' to what there's going to be! Black Jack, he's just been waitin' for you to show up. Now the lid'll pop off."

THAT had a curious sound and Red knew he didn't like it. Nor this pair; they were too much like the scum that he and Black Jack had blasted out of that Snowshoe town.

Abruptly, his guides pulled up, and at the view suddenly outspread before him, Red stopped as involuntarily. Outspread below was a valley, ranging up to half a mile across, running east for some distance, and west until lost in the afternoon haze.

There was a broken ledge below them, then smaller gullies, clumps of trees, deep grass and riotous flowers, set off by a stream which slipped se-

renely along. After the drabness of unbroken prairie, this was like a glimpse of paradise.

"Nice country, eh, Red?" Diamond asked. "Notice how sharp them bluffs are at most places. Run that way for miles. Mostly a mountain goat couldn't get up or down, 'cept for a few trails, and they're scattered far apart, an' easy to watch—"

He broke off as a puff of dust kicked up, between his horse and Red's. A moment later, from across the valley, came the dull crash of a rifle, and like an echo to it, a second bullet screeched across, so close that Red could hear the eerie whine of it.

"Damn!" said Whitey, startled. "Would you look at that now! Mebby you see why we go well heeled in this country?"

"Tryin' to murder us," Diamond said. "Figger they've got us with only short guns, eh? We'll show 'em!"

Already, the two were out of their saddles, grabbing rifles from saddle-sheaths and diving for such shelter as offered. Anger running rawly across his nerves, Red followed their example. Two more bullets had come unplesantly close in that brief interval.

"There they are," Whitey grunted. He was hunched behind a rock, resting his rifle across it. "Three of 'em, looks like. Off there by that gully."

Red had picked them out now. Some distance further back were three riderless horses, left to graze, while their riders took cover for this murderous ambush. But they were either supremely confident or carelessly disdainful of the prowess of those they were throwing lead at. They moved about, showing themselves with a painful disregard of possible consequences. Whitey's big Sharp's bellowed, and two more flashes of rifle-fire answered.

Taking his time, Red began lining his sights. He'd never been one to waste ammunition. Now he was cool, unhurried, steadied by that cold ripple of anger. When people started shooting at him, without warning or reason, there was just one way to answer—

His narrowed eyes jerked open suddenly, and he raised his head incautiously, staring. Then he swore excitedly.

"Don't shoot, boys! I'm damned, but those are women!"

"Well, I'll be a son of a gun—" Diamond eased on his own gun, moving as well. The three, off across there, were dressed in chaps and wore big mannish hats, but Red was sure of it now — despite their garb, they were women. Diamond didn't seem to doubt it now.

"That'll be the Irving brats," he ended. "And I'm hanged if I don't feel like pepperin' 'em, anyway. Guess they meant what they said—don't shoot, you fool," he adjured Whitey roughly. "You want Black Jack to break our necks for us?"

Whitey growled, as another bullet plopped unpleasantly close.

"If they shoot, why shouldn't we?" he snarled. "They're a passel of hellcats, if you ask me! I'm gettin' out of here—pronto!"

Suiting the action to the word, he jumped up suddenly, ran for his horse, with Diamond following. Red hesitated a moment, then decided that that was the best way of it. Those bullets were falling close, proof that the girls were handy with rifles, and their intentions deadly.

To remain would be decidedly unhealthy.

He jumped up and ran, noting that his two guides had reached their horses and were spurring, paying no attention to him.

Red had almost reached his own horse when the ground seemed to rise up and hit him, a wave of fiery blackness rocking through his head. As he pitched forward, he had time for only one confused thought. After going all through the war, and rambling up and down the frontier, cleaning up such towns as Snowshoe and being in the thick of plenty of trouble, it had remained for some girl to bring him down at last!

CHAPTER II

SOMETHING was very much amiss. Just what, Red couldn't quite figure out. His head felt twice its usual size, and throbbed like an Indian war drum on the eve of a big medicine dance. Besides, it was strangely pillowed, and something akin to rain drops seemed to be falling on his face.

He managed to open his eyes a little, and the strangeness persisted. His head was pillowed on a girl's lap, as she sat there, bending over him. But what he had at first imagined were tears falling on his face were wetter and more prosaic than that. She had a blue-dotted neckerchief in her hand, which had been sopped liberally in the creek, and with this she was wetting his face and watching him with a tense, almost fierce expression.

Her eyes were astonishingly, deeply blue—like the waters of a mountain lake at sunset. They were fringed by long lashes, and the slightly curling hair above, just now in a tumbled disorder, had all the hues of that same sunset. Her face was little, somehow piquant, though very fierce and determined. And if there were no tears actually falling, they were glinting on those long lashes, while her sternly-pressed lips trembled a little.

"If I've killed him," she muttered, and seemed appalled at the thought. "If you've killed him, Cherry Irving!"

Becoming aware that his eyes were open, her face changed. Hot anger replaced the growing remorse in her eyes, a flush swept away the whiteness of her cheeks, and she pushed him from her roughly, then sprang up, staring down at him, thoroughly outraged.

Even in that moment, Red saw that she wouldn't come quite up to his shoulder; she was young—not over nineteen or twenty—and though she was dressed in mannish chaps and wearing a six-gun, she still contrived to be very arrestingly feminine and distractingly beautiful.

"I thought you were dead—I hoped you were!" she said furiously.

A little dizzily, Red came to one elbow, feeling tenderly of the bump alongside his head with his other hand.

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, ma'am," he said.

"I didn't shoot to hit you!" she flared. "And I still don't see how it happened. You must have stumbled and knocked yourself out."

Sitting up, his head clearing, Red looked around. The two of them seemed to be alone, save for his horse and another grazing amicably side by side. Then his eyes fastened on a chunk of rock, the size of a hen's egg, showing freshly torn and scarred. Not far off was a bigger rock—roughly a couple of feet in diameter, and with a corner of it showing the same new scar. Red picked it up, and getting a little unsteadily to his feet, held it out to her.

"This seems to solve the mystery," he said. "Your bullet came along at about the same time as I did. It gouged off a hunk of that boulder, and flung it at me. Took me alongside the head and flattened me out like I was a pancake."

A little uncertainly, her eyes suddenly big with horror, the girl stared from the piece of stone to the gouged-out section of the boulder, and back to the swelling on his head. It was an odd accident, but if it had hit just a little higher and farther back, or just a little harder, it could easily have been fatal.

"I—I'M SORRY," she blurted. "I didn't mean to—but you've been warned to keep off. You've been told that we'll have no trespassing on the Barrier!"

"I guess I forgot," Red apologized. "You see, this is my first visit down this way, and I don't know much about such things."

"You should know, when you ride with such scum as you were with!" she flashed.

"Ignorance of the law *is* no excuse," he agreed. "I kind of thought there were three of you?"

"My sisters are making sure that your partners don't circle around where they aren't wanted," she explained. "There were three of us—and you were shooting at us, even if you knew we were women!"

"Not after we knew," Red contradicted. "You had us fooled at first. Wearin' chaps—and shootin' without any warning!"

The girl colored, and, aware of it, grew angry again.

"We shot to warn you—but not to hit you! Though it's what you deserved. And what you'll get next time any of you dare set foot on Barrier Ranch!"

Red had been making a prodigious effort. He had gained his feet, had stood there, smiling a little, talking, fighting against the recurrent waves of dizziness, a tendency to vertigo. Now, despite himself, the earth seemed suddenly to pitch and heave, and he tumbled headlong. Instantly she was down on her knees beside him, contrite again, her voice wonderfully soft.

"Oh, I'm sorry," she exclaimed. "I—I didn't know that you were so badly hurt—"

"Black Jack" Driscoll

Red turned over on his back again, then, gripping the grass tightly with both hands, sat up a second time.

"Better now," he said. "Just got—a little dizzy. You're so plumb beautiful, Miss Cherry, I guess you turned my head."

He grinned, and she flushed redly, then was furious again.

"How did you know my name, if you're a stranger?" she demanded.

"Heard you sayin' it to yourself," Red explained. "And it's a mighty pretty name. Just fits you. My favorite fruit too, when it comes to that."

"Oh you — you're impossible!" she said.

"Yeah, others have given me up for a bad mess, a long time back." Red shook his head sadly. "But when you go gunnin' for a man, and get him—well, you ought to kind of make allowances then. It's enough to upset a better man than me."

For a moment, her lips curved to a half-smile, and she studied him in silence—the strong line of his face, the easy grin, the scattering of freckles across his deeply tanned face and arms. He looked to be about twenty, when he smiled. In repose, he seemed nearer thirty. And there were lines in his face which might have made him forty. He wore a red cartridge belt, with two holsters, each stuffed with a big revolver. In every way but one, he was exactly what she had expected him to be, but in that one way he was strange and somehow puzzling, and, what was worse, vaguely disconcerting.

Abruptly she got to her feet again, staring down at him.

"You seem to be feeling better, now."

"I am," he acknowledged. "I'll soon be right as rain again. Have a head-

ache for a while, maybe, but I guess it's worth it, getting such a knockdown to such a girl. I'm sorry to've caused you so much trouble, and mighty grateful to you for takin' it."

SHE'D OUGHT to hate this man, Cherry felt—but he certainly had a way of talking that was disarming. Certainly, in her twenty summers, she had never met a man like him before.

"Then, if you're all right," she said. "I'll have to be going. I think you'll be able to ride, all right—back to your friends."

"Yeah, I guess I will," Red acknowledged, getting to his feet for the second time. "I've always been hard-headed, and sometimes it pays. Dog-gone, here I'm forgettin' all the manners I ever did know. Haven't told you my name. Folks call me Red—Red Hamilton."

"Which isn't of the slightest concern to me," Cherry informed him, coldly disdainful again. She turned, crossed to her horse, swept the reins up in one hand, then turned to survey him again.

"I'm going on home, now," she added. "And just as a word of friendly warning, since you claim to be new down here—ride off the Barrier as fast as you can, and don't make the mistake of setting foot on it again. Not ever."

She swung into the saddle, lithe and graceful, and Red felt a moment of panic—panic that she was going away, that she was, for whatever reason, still an enemy, and that he might never see her again. Strange and chaotic thoughts, which he did not bother to analize. He took a few staggering steps toward her, calling out.

"Oh now, wait, Miss Cherry. There's been a mistake here somewhere. I'm not quite as bad as you figure me, maybe. I'm even law-abidin'." He grinned slowly, as she turned and looked at him.

"Fact is," he went on. "If you want somebody to vouch for me—go to Black Jack Driscoll. He's Marshal of Drove City. He'll tell you I'm his friend—"

Red stopped, aware that this reference wasn't making the desired impression. Cherry's face had gone white and bitter.

"I thought so," she flashed. "Now get off this ranch—quick! Damn you, I—I wish I *had* killed you!"

CHAPTER III

DROVE CITY sprawled on the prairie, as unlovely a town as Red had ever seen. It had made a mushroom growth, but dust arose from the churned-up streets and settled over everything. Red eyed it without much interest. His thoughts were still on Cherry Irving and the coldness in her voice the way she had turned and galloped away after giving that last defi.

He had been pretty sure that the name of Black Jack would iron out all difficulties, but it had had the same effect as presenting her with a boquet of poison ivy.

Well, he'd soon be seeing Black Jack again, for the first time in a couple of years. Stabling his horse, he pushed through the doors of the Golden Argus, the most flamboyant saloon on the street. After the white-hot glare of the sun, the cool interior was a relief.

It was fancily, expensively decorated. Red was looking around when there came a sudden bellow, and the next instant, Black Jack came charging down the room, to grasp his hand heartily, slapping him on the back with the other, his face beaming with pleasure.

"Red!" he chortled. "By golly and little green apples, but it does my heart good to see your homely mug again, you old spavined war cayuse! Come on back where we can talk!"

He led the way to a rear room, the same old Black Jack, big, impulsive, hearty, and yet not the same. He had put on fifty pounds since Red had last seen him, and the hardness was giving way to a flabbiness which would come of too much good food and liquor, too soft an existence. He would tip the scales now at two hundred and sixty. There was too much color in his face, too—not all of wind

and sun; he wore richer, finer clothes than Red had remembered. With two fancy guns, and a marshal's star on his vest.

The back room was richer, more resplendent than the saloon itself. Black Jack sank into a big chair and grinned.

"How are you, Red? I sent a couple of the boys to meet you. But as usual, you come in alone, quiet as a kitten, and always when least expected."

"If you mean Whitey and Diamond, they met me," Red admitted. "How come you're in a place like this, Jack?"

"Oh, this?" Black Jack shrugged carelessly. "Not too bad, eh, Red? I own this layout."

"Own it?" Red paused, in the act of lighting the cigar which Black Jack had thrust upon him. "You are getting up in the world, aren't you? I supposed we'd be busy cleaning out just such dives of inequity."

Black Jack laughed.

"Same old Red, aren't you?" he chuckled. "Dives of iniquity is right, of course. Only this is classier than most. We have a high-class trade here, Red. A man can lose his money just as fast as anywhere else, but he has to check his hardware at the door, and keep order. If he acts up, he pays for it. Only the law wears a gun in this town."

"So that's how you keep your nice mirror, eh? But I thought I saw quite a few men wearin' guns?"

"Likely you did," Black Jack shrugged. "Deputies. They'd have been asking for your guns in a moment, if I hadn't spotted you first."

"IF YOU'VE got the town so well tamed, what the blazes did you send for me for?" Red demanded bluntly. "And besides, I never had but one deputy when I set out to clean up a town—and that was you."

"Sure, sure, I know. Those were the days, weren't they, Red? Just the two of us against the world. And we got action when we started, too. But the town's all right; I own quite a

slice of it, and control the rest. And my deputies are all right.

"But there's a bigger job than taming a town to be done, and for that, I want a man who's not just an ordinary deputy, but one I can depend on. So of course I sent for you."

"A bigger job? Idon't get it. I'd think, with the cattle drives going past, that keeping the lid on here would be a job."

"It is," Black Jack agreed. "Some nights are hectic, but we manage. But the job I have in mind makes this look like small change. The reason I sent the boys out to meet you, was because I wanted them to show you something, before you came on in to town. A slice of the Barrier Ranch, and its long canyon."

"They showed it to me," Red admitted.

"They did? Where the blazes are they now?"

RED SHRUGGED. He wasn't ready to do much talking, yet. Just now he preferred to listen.

"Riding around, likely," he suggested. "Quite a canyon."

"Isn't it?" Black Jack's voice was enthusiastic. "But it just gives you a little idea. The ranch itself—that's the real thing. One of the biggest chunks of land that one family ever got hold of. And I mean, the Irvings really got hold of it. Monty Irving owns it. No chance to dislodge him by bringing in a flock of nesters, or anything like that. He's canny, and he didn't make any mistakes."

"Sounds like a real man."

"He is, I'll give him credit. And with three daughters that take your breath away! You'd ought to see them—all together or separately, it makes about the same effect. Tara, or Cherry, or Jinny. The only thing is, Monty refuses to play along with me."

"How do you mean?"

"Didn't you see the possibilities out there? They're the biggest thing this side of heaven—or hell. The Texas Trail runs right through a part of Barrier Ranch. Crosses it for miles. And as it happens, it's the only logical place for the trail to go. Off west of the Barrier is the river, stretching for another hundred miles. There's not a decent crossing in all that length—quicksands and so on; if you do get across up there, you run into some of the worst water and dry country to be found anywhere.

"Men couldn't drive around. If you try to go east of the Barrier, it's the same thing in a different way. Natural barriers, then the settled country, where the farmers wouldn't let a herd pass. They *have* to go across Barrier Ranch."

"And Monty doesn't like it?"

"Yes. That's the devil of it. He *does* like it. Says he first got his start, driving a herd up from Texas. Has a fellow-feeling for the others, and all that sort of rot. I pointed out the possibilities to him—how, with me controlling the town here, and him the land there, we could both get rich while we've got the chance—for this won't last forever. Maybe ten more years, as I see it, then the country'll be so settled up that the cattle drives will be a thing of the past.

"The time to get rich is while we've got the chance. If he'd agree, we could make every herd that passes, pay toll—and pay through the nose, is what I mean. There's a fortune in it—and not chicken feed!"

Red listened, startled, a little disgusted at the avarice in his friend's face. This wasn't at all the Black Jack he had known in the old days.

"And so Monty refuses, eh?"

"Flat. He says the cattlemen appreciate fair treatment, keep their herds bunched up and hustle them across. In return, they can all go, without paying a cent. And I can't budge him from that. In fact," Black Jack grinned. "He's got so he hates me, and has warned me and my men not to trespass, on pain of being planted on Barrier! But, since he won't play along with me and have half, I'll have it all!"

"How do you mean?"

"That's why I sent for you. It's a big thing, with a fortune for both of us, and we'll cut it two ways, same as always. But it'll mean a fight—and a real one. Though I've been getting things ready, with a real crew—just

waiting for you to arrive before I went to work.

"Now we won't waste any time! We'll take over the Barrier—and then watch these cattlemen pay through the nose! They'll raise hell—but we know how to handle 'em, you and me, boy! And they can raise all the cain they like, but they'll pay, just the same. For there isn't another thing they can do!"

CHAPTER IV

RED LISTENED with amazement. This was the old Black Jack with his enthusiasms and his eagerness for a good fight, but he was also a stranger, a sinister black moth which had emerged from a harmless cocoon. His close-shaven face still showed black, as was always the case, the black eyes glittered coldly in a flushed face.

"There's a fortune in it," he went on. "The average trail herd has two thousand head in it. Sometimes a dozen or even twenty herds pass in a single day. If we charge 'em a dollar a head to go through the Barrier, think what that'll amount to—in a day! Multiply it by a summer, by ten years—"

"You're d r e a m i n g," Red said roughly. "Those men are Texas men, and tough as they come. They'd never pay it!"

"I know they're tough," Black Jack agreed. "But I know how to make 'em pay. It's such a deadwood cinch that it would be a crime, not to take advantage of it."

"You don't talk the way you used to, Jack."

"How do you mean?"

"I remember you giving the coat off your back to a widow; it was raining and cold as the devil. And another time when you'd been out foraging and had found one skinny chicken, and we had it cooked—which would be the first meal we'd had in twenty-four hours. You gave that to a couple of little pickaninnies who came along with eyes bigger than their faces. Another time—"

Black Jack laughed, self-consciously.

"Oh, that?" he said. "Sure, and I'd do it again. I'm always for the underdog, Red. You know that. But these fellows have plenty, and the way they tramp on any poor devil who wants to get a bit of land in their country, and try and get a start—"

"How about the Irvings? You aim to ruin them, don't you?"

"I offered Monty a full partnership, but he turned me down—"

"You offered him a half-interest in what was *all* his to start with. Maybe he didn't see it as such a philanthropic gesture."

Black Jack gestured impatiently.

"Or I offered to buy him out, at a fair price." He shook the ash from his cigar carelessly. "I'll see that the family doesn't starve, so far as that goes."

"How do you mean?"

Black Jack grinned, a little self-consciously.

"I mentioned the girls, Red. The oldest one, Tara, is about twenty-two. Then there's Cherry and Jinny. I've never been a ladies' man, Red, as you know. But there's something about Tara—and, as it happens, she likes me pretty well, too. Their foreman, MacNeill, has been trying to crowd me out there, but I'm not worried."

"Do you think that ruining your prospective father-in-law will make Tara like you any better?"

"You have a damned blunt way of putting things, Red—the same as always. But that's what I like about you. I may make one more try at settling things peacefully—for her sake. But," and his face set in ugly, stubborn lines. "It's too big a stake to pass up for anything or anybody, and I'm damned if I'll do it."

"I'm surprised at you, Jack," Red said. "We've fought shoulder to shoulder, more than once, to clean up a situation like this. Now you're the king-pin of it youself. How come?"

BLACK JACK laughed again, half embarrassed.

"I haven't changed so much," he denied. "I always felt like a fool, busting in and breaking up something that was paying off well. Somebody always trims the suckers anyway. It

might as well be me, and I like it, Red."

"I don't," Red said bluntly.

Black Jack's brows twitched, then he smiled again.

"We've always got along, Red," he said. "Always been partners. I've never forgotten that for one moment. In fact," he stood up, strode across the room, shoved aside a stand, and revealed a big iron safe. He opened it, extracted a heavy package, and tossed it into Red's lap. "Open it," he commanded.

Surprised, Red removed the brown paper wrapping, and stared at the sheaf of bills. Black Jack chuckled.

"Ten thousand dollars," he said. "But, because paper's sometimes just paper, there's twice as much put away in gold. And it's yours, Red—your share of the profits to date, above what's gone back into expenses. Chicken feed, compared to what we'll soon be getting, but a starter. That's not counting a half-interest in this saloon, and a dozen other buildings, which are making money as fast as fools can pour it in. I never forgot that we were partners."

Red stared, startled, touched, a little appalled. Here was the old Black Jack, the man he had known and loved. But the rest of it—Red's voice was husky as he tossed the bills on the desk.

"I never dreamed that you'd think of such a thing, Jack. And I—I couldn't take it in any case—"

"What the devil do you mean, you couldn't take it? I tell you it's yours. We're partners."

"I'm afraid not, Jack. Not in such—"

Red stopped. A peculiar knock had sounded at the door, and then it was pushed open. Diamond and Whitey entered, disheveled and uneasy. Their faces cleared a little at sight of Red.

"So you got here, all right!" Diamond breathed a sigh of relief. "We didn't know what had come of you."

"What's this all about, anyway?" Black Jack demanded. "Red hasn't told me, but I've a hunch that you birds made a mess of the job."

"Maybe we did, Jack," Whitey conceded. "But what would you have done? We met Red, like you said, and took him for a look at the Barrier. Just as we were havin' a look out across the canyon, three hombres started shootin' at us, with rifles."

"And you didn't say a word about that, Red," Black Jack sighed, resuming his seat. "What happened then?"

"Those bullets were coming mighty close, so we flopped in the grass and started shootin' back," Whitey explained. "There didn't seem to be much choice. I was just gettin' set to do some good work, when Red discovers that those three are the Irving brats!"

"What?" Black Jack came out of his chair again, his big teeth almost biting the cigar through in his excitement. "They were shooting at you—and you were shooting at them?"

"We didn't guess they was the girls, up till then," Diamond said sourly. "You know how they ride around. And they was sure pepperin' at us. We quit shootin', but they kept on. So we decided we'd have to get out of there. Whitey and me got on our horses, but it wasn't till we'd gone a ways that we missed Red. By that time, Tara and Jinny was swingin' to cut us off, and peppering at us again. They chased us miles out of our way, and I ain't sure yet that they didn't try to hit us."

BLACK JACK stared. Then he sank down in his chair, long legs outstretched, and roared with laughter. Finally he sobered.

"I'd like to have seen that," he said. "Two of my bravest gunmen being run off by a couple of girls! That's rich. But what happened to you, Red? Don't tell me you stopped to lallygag with Cherry?"

"Something like that," Red agreed. "One of her bullets clipped a hunk off a boulder and hit me side of the head. When I woke up, she was swabbing my face with a wet cloth, and afraid she'd killed me."

"What a break for you! It was worth it, wasn't it?"

"Maybe it was, at that," Red conceded.

Black Jack wiped his eyes, and tossed his cigar aside.

"Well, you'll have to agree that there are a lot of interesting things in

this lay-out," he said. "If I take care of Tara, and you do the same for Cherry, we'll naturally be in a position to see that the Irvings are well looked after, so that ought to remove your chief objection."

Red stood up.

"I'm sorry, Jack. You've aimed to play square with me, but that's just one angle. I don't like any of the setup. It's a stinking, rotten mess that you've got into, Jack, and I'm ashamed of you. I'll have none of it."

CHAPTER V

A LONG moment of silence followed that flat pronouncement. Diamond and Whitey stood tense. Black Jack swung, eyes narrowing dangerously, big fists bunching at his sides. For a moment he glared, but Red met it dispassionately, the corners of his mouth quirking again.

"You need to be told a few things for your own good, Jack," he said. "And I'm exercisin' the privileges of friendship to tell 'em to you."

Black Jack relaxed.

"You come mighty near straining those privileges, Red," he said. "No man has ever talked to me that way and gotten away with it, before."

"No man ever had to, in the old days. You never used to be that kind of a man."

"Well, I am now; and I'm going through with it. Sure you won't change your mind? It's the softest touch you'll ever find."

"Soft things are frequently rotten. This one is."

"I'm sorry, Red," Black Jack said, after a moment. "Mighty sorry. I wanted you working with me. What do you figure to do now?"

"I'll ride back where I came from. There's nothing else to do, is there?"

"Feeling as you do, the Irvings would pay good money for a man who knows how to use a gun as well as you do."

"Do you think I'd come down here to help you, and then turn against you?"

"No, I guess you wouldn't, Red. Though, them being the underdog—" he shrugged. "I wouldn't much blame you. But we can still be friends. Rest up before you start back, anyway. We'll forget this has happened. I'm pretty busy, and you look tired. Get a good night's sleep, and tomorrow we'll just visit. Whitey, take him over to his room. Anything you want is yours for the asking, Red."

"Thanks, Jack," Red agreed. He followed Whitey out of the room, knowing that their old, fine comradeship was ended. No matter what words they might use now, things could never be the same again. They were following two trails which spread farther and farther apart.

Whitey led him to a hotel across the street, and upstairs to a room far finer than anything he had expected to find in this town. Catching his glance, Whitey nodded soberly.

"The boss owns this layout," he said. "And he likes things fancy."

Going downstairs, Red ate supper, finding that his offer to pay was smilingly refused. Black Jack meant what he said, that he could have whatever he wanted in this town. Whatever he wanted, except the things that counted.

Supper finished, Red hesitated, debating whether to go to bed, or go out and see the town. Neither alternative interested him much. It was too early for bed, and restlessness gripped him. On the other hand, towns like this were an old story. But he chose the town, and stepped outside, into the soft dusk.

A twisted grin quirked his lips as he walked. It was easy to see that Drove City was as wild and wicked as Snowshoe had been in its greatest heyday. A town run by a boss, a town much in need of cleaning up. There were, apparently, some few things here which even Snowshoe had never tolerated. The lid was off, with a vengeance.

HE HAD come here to help clean it up—and been invited to sit in on the profits! Disgustedly, he swung off the main street, aimlessly, down a dark, silent side street. He was thinking seriously of returning to his hotel and bed, when a well-re-

membered voice came suddenly, clearly to his ears.

"I—I don't know, Jack. Of course I love you—but I don't know!"

It was followed by Black Jack's deep, throaty laugh.

"If you love me, Tara, as you say you do, that's all that matters. I'll do the thinking for both of us, and make things come out right. You just said you loved me, so you ought to trust me."

Red saw where they were. A flight of outside stairs led up the side of the building to a second-story window, with a sort of balcony under it. Black Jack and Tara were seated half-way up the steps, holding hands like any schoolboy and girl. And this was Tara, not Cherry, but her voice was the same.

Red's impulse was to keep going. He had no wish to eavesdrop, especially on such a scene as this. If Black Jack preferred to make love to the daughter of the man he planned to ruin, and if she cared to do the same, knowing how he had clashed with her father, that was none of his business. But he saw that he had stumbled into a situation which he could not so readily back out of. The sound of a couple of horsemen, passing down the middle of the street as he came along, had drowned out his footsteps and the sound of their voices as well, besides diverting attention from his shadowy figure.

But now, if he tried to move again, from where he stood in a little patch of shadow, close up to the wall, they would be sure to see him, and would probably suspect that he had been there a long time. Whether they recognized him or not, it would likely prove embarrassing. With the situation in general as it now was, Black Jack would probably hail him. When he saw who it was— Regretfully, Red decided to remain where he was. At least until another distracting horseman happened along.

"I—I think I trust you, Jack," Tara said slowly. "But how can I be sure? The thing you've suggested to Dad—it's rather horrible. And he's issued a warning for you and all your men to stay off the Barrier, or be treated as trespassers—"

Black Jack chuckled.

"And you and your sisters have been backing up that warning, with hot lead, I hear. I'll have a fire-eater for a wife, won't I?"

"Wife?" Tara repeated. "You've never—said that before, Jack!"

"Haven't I? I'm a clumsy sort of a lover, I guess, Tara. But you'll have to put that down to inexperience. I aimed to say it. You're the first woman I've ever said it to, too. Believe me, I don't want any trouble with your father, Tara. That's the last thing on earth I do want. Marry me—now, tonight. I'll get the Judge, and we'll do it up right away. Can't you see? It's the one sure way to avoid trouble. As your husband, I'll be Monty's son-in-law. Then we can talk it over, and do it all as one big family. We'll work things out, and there won't be any trouble."

Tara hesitated.

"I—I don't know," she said. "To do it so fast—so sudden, without Dad knowing, or Cherry or Jinny—or Mac—"

"What do you care about Mac?" Black Jack demanded roughly. "It's me you're going to marry, not MacNeill."

"Ye-es, I know," Tara agreed, still hesitant. "But Mac does love me, Jack—and he's always been good to me—a friend ever since I can remember, almost—"

"I know, and I can't blame him for being in love with you—poor devil," Black Jack agreed. "But if we put it off, and tell them, there'll just be the devil of a row. Mac wouldn't feel any better, as you can see. The kindest way for him is to find out after it's over with. And once it's done, your folks will have to listen to me. Beforehand, they'd kick me out—or try to. And I don't kick around easily, even for Monty Irving. I don't want trouble. I want you—and peace. That's why I want to marry you, right now."

"Well—" Tara was hesitant, but being swept away by his impetuosity. "Maybe it would be best—"

"Of course it would. I'll go and hunt up the Judge. First I'll take you to the Palace Hotel, and then find him. It won't take long."

"You're sure—sure that it'll work out all right, Jack? If it didn't— it would break my heart."

"I'll do my best," Black Jack assured her. "And when I get started, I'm rather a wonder-worker. Come on, and before you're an hour older, you'll be Mrs Jack Driscoll!"

CHAPTER VI

THEY clattered down the steps and away. Red watched them go, appalled. It was none of his business, of course, but he didn't like it. Black Jack was in love, and he intended to marry Tara honorably. But after that was said, there was still a lot unsaid and undone It looked to Red as though he was marrying her, more with the notion of using her as a pawn in a crooked game, than for any other reason. And Red didn't like it.

He wouldn't have liked it in any case, with any woman. He knew that. But Tara was Cherry's sister, and very like her, and that made it a lot worse. Red stopped, staring bleakly on the darkness. The truth hit him like a blow. To ride away, out of this country, and never see Cherry again—

It couldn't happen. To fall in love with a person, on the first seeing. Only, he knew with sudden clarity. it had happened to him. Cherry might hate him, but he loved her.

Now he had to ride, and the sooner the better. If he stayed, trouble was bound to break, and he'd be caught in the middle of it. That wouldn't do. There was such a thing as honor, and he'd given his word.

He could ride out, and come back later, after it had all been settled, one way or the other. That way, Cherry would know that he'd had nothing to do with it. And if things went badly for the Barrier, and she was in need of a friend, later on—he would try and be that friend. But now he had to get out.

He strode to the stable, got a fresh horse, and rode out, into the night. Cold rage gripped him. He felt like a whipped cur, running away. He wasn't, but he couldn't shake the feeling. What a devil of a mess! Well, he'd soon be out of town—

A lone horseman was coming down the street, riding in from the country. He pulled up abruptly at sight of Red, and in the half-light, Red saw that he was a tall, spare man, and his face was haggard.

"Friend, you haven't seen a girl on a pinto pony, have you?" he demanded, with something of desperation in his voice. "Tara Irving rode into town, alone—" he groaned. "And this is no town for a woman like her, at night! I've got to find her."

"I haven't seen any such horse," Red answered truthfully, and couldn't resist asking. "Are you Mac MacNeill?"

"Yes. You haven't seen her?"

Red hesitated. Instinctively, he liked MacNeill. The foreman of Barrier was very much in love with Tara, that was easy to see. Red didn't want to lie, but to tell the truth was out of the question. To do that would mean a new tenant for Boothill in the morning, and Tara grief-stricken on her wedding night.

"I'm a stranger in town," Red explained, to gain time. "What's she like?"

"She comes about to my shoulder, and she was wearing—"

MacNeill broke off. His voice was drowned out by a louder noise—the crashing, ugly bark of a six-shooter, fired from across the street, in a pool of darkness. As though that had been the signal, there were other shots, a whole fusillade of them, coming at once, and now from down the street on the other side as well.

THIS was cross-fire, and a murderous ambushment. There were at least four or five gunmen hidden in the two positions; they had recognized MacNeill, were out to gun him down, since he had been so indiscreet as to ride into Drove City, alone and at night. Here was the opening round of the war.

And Red was caught in the middle of it! Instantly, he saw what was a natural enough mistake on their part. He was here, with MacNeill. They figured him as a cowhand from the Barrier. and they were aiming to

make it, not one, but two less hands to deal with in the final fight. He too, was marked for death.

Only the fact that the first shot had been a miss, and had served to startle both their horses, saved them from the following fusillade. But, dancing wildly among the whining bullets, with the poor light to add to the difficulties of accurate shooting, they were still alive. And Red saw instantly that MacNeill was a fighting man. Jerking a gun, he was doing the only possible thing—riding straight into the teeth of those gunmen down the street, shooting back. Red was siding him, one of his own guns out. It was shoot their way out of this or die.

Seeing themselves discovered, the men down there had swarmed into the open now, and there were three of them. Red felt the vicious twitch of a bullet through his coat sleeve, saw the gunman centering his aim on him with a cool deliberation, and fired a fraction faster. The killer spun about, flopped and lay kicking.

But MacNeill hadn't fared so well. One of those shots had dropped his horse, flinging him off heavily. Two men started running at him, intending to finish him, and Red swerved his own horse, jerking at his second gun as his first one was emptied. He knew that he had winged one of them; for the pair ducked for cover, and as MacNeill came to his feet, Red leaned down.

"Up behind me," he jerked out. "Fast, man!"

MacNeill needed no urging. He put a hand on the horse's rump, tried to swing himself up, and almost collapsed in the middle of his effort. Turning, Red caught him, pulled him up, and saw that his own hand was red with blood. MacNeill was hit pretty badly, and the killer pack were closing in again for the finish.

"Hang on to me," Red gritted, and swung back, looking for a target. He saw a flash of gun-fire, then bullets were spattering at him as he shot. New recruits were swarming to the attack, determined to finish them off. Whether these men were all "deputies" or not, there were certainly a lot of them in Drove City tonight who had their hardware right with them.

A scream rang in his ears, and Red saw Tara Irving, mounted now on a black horse, spurring desperately to join them. She had heard the gunfire, apparently, had guessed what it might mean, and had run out to have a look, had recognized MacNeill and was coming to his rescue, regardless of consequences.

And therein, Red thought grimly, lay the real answer to whom she loved. Black Jack was a man with a lot of charm, when he wanted to exert it. A man with a big, dusky sort of a background, with glamor, and it had swept her off her feet. But when it came to show-down, it was the foreman of Barrier whom she really loved.

For him she was fighting like a mother defending her young. Her own gun was out and barking now, and someone cursed frenziedly, yelling out that it was a woman. The gunfire slackened abruptly, for most of these men, while they would gun a man down without a qualm, drew the line at shooting at a woman. And those who knew, knew likewise how the boss of Drove City felt about Tara Irving.

Not all of the shooting had stopped. A couple of men were still deliberately centering their fire on Red and MacNeill, making a double target as they did on the horse. Red felt a vicious sting along his left arm, below the shoulder, felt the sudden turgid flow of blood running down it. He steadied from the shock of it, aimed, and fired again—and saw Diamond stagger out into a patch of light, a new pucker beside the old one on his cheek, the new one suddenly spreading to a red smear. He took another faltering step or so, then fell forward on his face, and spurring to a gallop, as Tara swept alongside, Red was around the corner of the street.

No more shots were fired as they rode, Tara leading the way now. Outside of town, Red pulled to a stop.

"How are you, Mac?" he asked.

MacNeill lifted a heavy head from where it had sagged on Red's shoulder. His voice was dull.

"Get me home," he said. "I'll be—all right."

Tara was off her horse and beside them, her face white. But she had plenty of nerve.

"It's the only thing to do," she said. "It isn't very far. Oh, Mac, don't die! If you do—I'll feel like a murderess!"

CHAPTER VII

THEY reached Barrier Ranch and got MacNeill to bed. He had been shot below the shoulder, on the right side, and had lost a lot of blood. The wound looked nasty, to Red. Whether it was low enough to puncture a lung, or not, he didn't know. It appeared to be about fifty-fifty. If that had happened, then MacNeill's chances were far less than that.

But the foreman was alive, and Tara, her face white, was calmly efficient, bringing hot water and clean cloths as Red instructed, without arousing the sleeping ranch.

"You seem to know what you're doing," she said.

"I used to help a medico in the army, some," Red explained. "He knew what he was doing, too."

"I—do you think Mac—will he get well? If he should die—it would be all my fault."

Red knew what she meant, though he didn't let on. She had ridden in to Drove City to see Black Jack, and had slipped off alone and, as she thought, unobserved. Mac had found out about it and had lost no time in going after her.

"That's all we can do, for the present," Red said. "He's asleep. I'll keep watch, so if he wakes up and wants anything, I can give it to him."

"You'll do no such thing," Tara assured him. "I don't know who you are, but you've saved Mac—and me, tonight. I'll keep watch, and you get some sleep. Why you're wounded yourself!" she exclaimed suddenly, seeing the red stain on his shirt sleeve.

"Just a scratch," Red assured her. "But if it'll make you feel any better, you can help me to tie it up. It's a bit awkward to get at."

Red awoke, next morning, to find the Barrier buzzing like a disturbed bee-hive. They had wakened to the news of the gun-fight in town, to a wounded Mac. Trouble was nothing new, in Drove City. But a deliberate attempt to murder the foreman of Barrier was.

Tara, looking a little worried, but otherwise as fresh as though she had not spent a sleepless night, turned and saw Red, and said something to those clustered around her. As they turned, he saw Cherry, saw the quick look of recognition and amazement which overspread her face. The third girl, he knew, must be Jinny. And Monty Irving was a tall man with a touch of gray about his temples, who walked with a limp, as though a once-broken leg had healed imperfectly.

"This is the man who saved, Mac, Dad," Tara said. "I—I forgot to ask your name, last night."

"Names don't matter," Monty Irving declared, striding forward to grasp Red's hand heartily. "Whoever you are, sir, we're mighty glad to know you, and to make you welcome to Barrier Ranch."

"I'm glad to have been able to help," Red said, watching Cherry out of the corner of his eye. "My name's Hamilton — Red Hamilton, folks call me. Lately from up Montana way."

"I'm from Montana myself," Monty said heartily. "These are my daughters—Tara, whom you've met, Cherry, and Jinny, and the three of them are more trouble than all the rest of the ranch put together."

"Cherry and I met yesterday," Red said. "In fact, all three of your girls gave me a very warm reception."

CHERRY'S face was scarlet, while Jinny stared and Tara gave a little gasp.

"Was that—you!" Tara demanded. "Oh, I didn't know!"

Monty was looking from one to the other, puzzled.

"What's this?" he demanded. "You don't mean that this is one of the men you wild women were shooting at, as trespassers?"

"That's the size of it, I guess, Dad," Cherry said. "This is the man I almost killed—and it's kept me awake all night, thinking about it, if that's any satisfaction to you, sir," she added to Red.

"Awake, nothing!" Jinny contradicted. "You mean you snored and kept *me* awake!"

"I don't snore, I'll have you to know!" Cherry denied. "Oh!" She looked around wildly, and met Red's slow grin.

"I snore myself, or so I've been told," he said. "Kind of a natural habit, like breathin'—one way of doing that, in fact. If you've been worried about this, Mr. Irving, don't let it trouble you. I've been kind of enjoyin' most of it."

"I still don't know what it's all about," Monty confided. "But then, half the time, with these girls, I'm that way. But it looks to me as if they were a little over-eager with their shooting yesterday."

"Don't know that they were," Red contradicted. "I was ridin' with a pair of townsmen yesterday, who wanted to show me something. Gents named Diamond and Whitey. Black Jack Driscoll sent them out to meet me."

"You see, Dad?" Jinny said.

"That's what you said," Monty agreed. "And I told you girls then, as I have before, that I don't like the idea of you going around and getting into gun-battles. It isn't lady-like, and it's dangerous. You were saying, Mr. Hamilton?"

"I was sayin' that their mistake was a natural one. I was in bad company, though I didn't know it."

"You told me that Black Jack was your friend!" Cherry charged.

"Happened to be the truth. Black Jack and I served together durin' the war. After that, I was town marshal at a place called Snowshoe, a town just about as tough as Drove City seems to be now. Jack was my deputy. We cleaned the town up. When he wrote for me to come down here, I figured there was another job of the same sort to be done. So I came."

"And found that you'd made a mistake," Tara amplified. "For now that you've seen that Black Jack *doesn't* intend to clean the town up, you seem to be fighting on the other side."

Red gave her a quick glance. She didn't suspect, of course, that he knew of her indiscretion of the evening, or that she had been all but ready to marry Black Jack. Plainly, her eyes had been opened about as violently as his own.

"Guess that's about the size of it," he conceded. "Jack told me what he wanted to do with Barrier here, and figured I'd side him. We've always been friends—Jack's saved my life almost more times than I can count. But he seems to have gotten off on the wrong side of the fence since I saw him last. I couldn't see it that way."

"You didn't need to tell us that," Monty declared. "Not after last night. But I'm glad that you have. Let's all go and have breakfast. It'll be getting cold."

THEY ATE, Red seated beside Monty, Jinny on his other side, Cherry across the table, a very subdued-looking Cherry this morning, but, if anything, he decided, more beautiful than ever. And he suspected that when she was so demure that there was mischief cooking behind those long lashes. Nothing more was said, for the moment, about the situation.

Tara ate hastily, and her anxiety was plain, despite her effort to hide it. If she had been in doubt, the evening before, as to which of two men she loved, that doubt had been blown away in the blast of a killer's guns. Black Jack Driscoll had turned, in her mind, from being a lover to an enemy.

MacNeill, though still asleep, tossed feverishly now, and the wound looked red and ugly. Monty nodded decisively.

"He's got to have a doctor," he said. "There's no question of that. I'll go after Doc Granger, right now."

"No, Dad!" Tara's voice was sharp. "They'll shoot you down too, if you try to set foot in town now. It wouldn't do."

Monty's face set in grim lines.

"You think it's come to open war on any of us from the Barrier?" he asked. "Well, if that's what they want, they can have all they like of it! But he's got to have a doctor."

"I know that—unless you can do something more, Red?" Her glance met his, appealingly. "But — we don't want you killed, Dad. That wouldn't help."

"I'm afraid there's nothing more I can do," Red answered. "He needs a doctor, all right. But Tara's right, they'd probably shoot it out with anybody from here, especially you. I'll ride in and get a doctor."

"And get yourself killed?" Monty asked. "This isn't your fight, you know. And if they want trouble, it might as well come now as later. We can send several men, just to make them think twice."

"I'm afraid that's what they'd like," Red said, knowing something of Black Jack's tactics. "I seem to be in this—and I'll go. I don't think they'll shoot at me—not in daylight. They mistook me for a Barrier rider last night. But Black Jack's still my friend, even if we can't see eye to eye."

"Maybe you can get away with it, though I'm ready for trouble whenever they are," Monty growled. "But if you go and get a medico to come out here—you'll be taking sides, then. Openly."

"Reckon so," Red agreed soberly. "But I'll talk it over with Jack and have it out in the open. I promised him that, if I couldn't help him, I'd ride out and not fight against him. Maybe I'll change my mind—but I want him to know where I stand."

He was at his horse, ready to swing into the saddle, when Cherry came running. Her face was flushed again, but her eyes shone.

"I just wanted to tell you that I'm glad—that you're going to fight on our side!" she breathed, and was gone as quickly as she had come.

CHAPTER VIII

AT THE OUTSKIRTS of town, Red saw a lounging figure stiffen to attention. A man who eyed him narrowly, then strode quickly forward to place himself in his path.

"Anybody comin' in to town has to park their guns here," he said arrogantly. "Marshal's orders."

"Tightenin' up a little, aren't you?" Red asked.

"We're tightenin' up plenty, feller. Ain't going to have no more trouble in this town."

"That's fine. I'll tell Black Jack that you're keeping a sharp watch. But I'll keep my own hardware. I'm Red Hamilton."

It was apparent that the sentry had heard his name. He stepped back, half-doubtfully.

"Red Hamilton?" he repeated. "Guess it's all right, then."

Red found that Doc Granger's office was upstairs over a saloon, with a rough outside stairway leading up to it. He climbed, pushed open the door, and saw the medico, busily writing at a desk in the corner of the room.

He was a chubby, rotund little man with mutton-chop whiskers and a fierce expression, and now he turned, pushing back his hat to reveal a large bald spot surrounded by graying hair.

"Well?" he barked. "Who's been shot this time?"

"MacNeill, of the Barrier," Red replied as directly.

"Eh? MacNeill, you say? Thought I heard a ruckus last night, but I've had no calls. Though I understand there's been a couple of fresh graves in Boothill this morning. Where is he?"

"Out at the ranch. Below the right shoulder. I think it missed the lung, but it looks red and ugly this morn-

ing." Doc grunted, gathering things into his bag.

"What'd you say yore name was?" he demanded.

"I didn't say. Happens to be Hamilton—Red Hamilton."

Doc's face puckered in a twisted scowl.

"Red Hamilton! Hell's bells! What you wantin' a medico for Barrier for? Ain't you this friend Black Jack's been expectin'?"

"That's me, all right."

Doc surveyed him, snapped the bag shut, and snorted.

"None of my business," he growled. "Others try to kill, I try to cure what they don't finish at the start. That's the sort of fools men are—includin' me. I'd do better to let 'em die. That many less fools to clutter up the earth. Whose friend you are is yore funeral, I guess—and I'll be ridin'."

He stomped out and down the stairs, crossed to a saddled horse nearby, and was away up the street in a cloud of dust. Red watched him go, then turned down the street toward the Golden Argus.

TODAY, heads turned curiously to watch his progress, and he knew that he was known. He entered the saloon, walked down to the back room, and knocked. Black Jack's voice boomed back.

"Who is it?"

"Red."

"Come on in." Black Jack threw open the door. "Where you been, Red? I've been wondering about you?"

"I spent the night on the Barrier. Had breakfast with the Irvings."

"Yes? Taking a look for yourself, eh? Great bunch of girls."

"They sure are. You know, I suppose, that I lugged MacNeill home, last night, after he'd been shot up?"

Black Jack nodded soberly.

"So I heard. How is he?"

"He took a bad one. Has about a fifty-fifty chance, I'd say. I just sent Doc Granger out there."

"Granger's good. And if you patched him up first, that's a lot in his favor. But how the devil did you get mixed up in this, Red?"

"I seem to have my old habit of stepping into the middle of things, whether I like it or not. Mac rode in to town as I was starting to ride out—for I'd decided that I'd better get out before I got mixed up any more, Jack. He asked me if I'd seen Tara, on a pinto pony. While he was talking to me, a bunch of men, whom I suspect of drawing your pay, started in to mow the both of us down, in a crossfire. It was dark, of course, and I suppose they figured, since I was with MacNeill, that I was one of the Barrier hands."

Black Jack came to his feet, striding back and forth in the narrow confines of the office. He swung suddenly, his face troubled.

"Reckon that's it, Red. And I'm darned sorry that it happened that way. I wouldn't have had it happen for the world, if I'd known."

"You mean about me—or Mac?"

"You. Darn MacNeill—though I certainly didn't give any orders to ambush and murder him. But you know how it is, when you get a crew of scum."

"I know. That's why I'm surprised that you'd have such a crew. After all, you're responsible for the guns you hire, Jack."

Black Jack made a wry face.

"YOU HAVE a nice, blunt way of putting it," he said. "Maybe you're right—but I'm in this now, and I'm going through with it. But I'm sorry that it happened to you. I didn't plan it that way, Red."

"I know you didn't, Jack. But your crew is scum. Diamond recognized me—and tried his best to get me."

"And, since we buried him this morning, you beat him to the draw, as usual. If he'd known anything, he should have known better than to tangle with you. Served him right. But I didn't know of it."

"I believe you, Jack. But you see how it is. I aimed to ride out of town, last night, to avoid getting in

this any deeper. Seems like I'm in, whether I like it or not."

"You mean you're takin' a hand with the Barrier?"

"Guess I am, Jack. I didn't aim it that way—but when I get dealt a hand, I generally aim to play it. I've always sided the under-dog."

"And there's some pretty girls out there!" Black Jack grinned, then his smile became wry. "I can't blame you, Red, under the circumstances. You've been square, same as always. But I hate it like the devil. I wanted you down here on my side. If you're on the other side, that makes a big difference in the odds. And—I never thought I'd see the day when we'd be fightin' each other, Red."

"Neither did I." Red stood up. "I don't like that part of it any better than you do, Jack."

Black Jack stood for a long moment, gazing unseeingly out of the window, puffing furiously at his unlighted cigar. Then he turned and thrust out his hand.

"I can't say what's going to happen now, Red—not after what Diamond tried to do last night. You're right, I've got a crew of scum—killers. If I wasn't in so deep, I'd pull out—but I've got to keep going now. But, so far as I'm concerned, Red, and no matter what happens—if you stop a bullet, it won't be from my gun, or my orders. I want you to believe that."

"I do, Jack." Red blinked suddenly as he grasped Black Jack's hand, knowing that it would probably be for the last time. "I'll fight you to the finish, Jack—but it's nothing personal. And you'll never stop a bullet from a gun of mine, either."

They stood in silence a moment, then Red turned and went quickly out. Men looked curiously at him as he tramped the length of the saloon, but, seeing what was in his face, no one tried to stop him.

CHAPTER IX

DOC GRANGER was coming out of MacNeill's bedroom as Red entered the house. He stopped, head cocked on one side like that of a bantam rooster.

"Back, eh?" he asked. "I'm sort of glad to see you, at that."

"How is he?"

"You did a good job, patchin' him up. It didn't get the lung. Like you say, he stands a fifty-fifty chance. Thing like that, you have to give it time, and good nursin'. Reckon he'll get both."

Red found Tara at the bedside, her face betraying her anxiety. MacNeill was sleeping. Tara motioned for silence, moved to a far corner of the room.

"What did he say?" she whispered. "Tell me the truth."

"He thinks Mac is doing fine," Red assured her. "With good nursing, he'll probably make it all right."

"He'll get that," Tara assured him, almost fiercely. "Oh, Red, if you only knew how I've treated him—and what a fool I've been—and he rode in after me, last night—"

"I know," Red said. "But maybe it's working out lucky for both of you. If trouble hadn't started when it did—"

"Yes?" she whispered, startled. "You—you mean—?"

"I know what you were just about persuaded to do," Red said. "But don't worry, I won't tell anybody, ever."

"I was a fool—a stupid little fool," Tara sobbed. "Oh, Red— he's got to live. I'll be the one that killed him, if he dies!"

"You're too level-headed a girl to get hysterical," Red assured her. "If you want him to live, keep steady. That's your job."

"And I'll do it," Tara agreed. "I'm glad you're with us, Red."

Outside, he found Monty, pacing back and forth.

"I'm a little worried," Monty confessed. "It looks for me as though we're in for real trouble. I don't want to press you, what you do is up to you. Only I'd like to know where you stand, in this. I've got to know where I stand, now."

"I'm with you," Red assured him. "I've told Jack so."

"You'll fight with us?"

"To the finish, if you'll let me."

"Let you? Man, I've heard something about the man that Black Jack had sent for. A one-man army, and all the rest of it. And you know something of his methods. I'm not asking you to do anything underhanded, but—well, I figure we're in the right. And I'm in a hole, with Mac shot up. I've a lot of good men, but none of them are good enough to fill Mac's boots at a time like this, and head up the fight. I'd like to have you do it. Take Mac's job, at least till he's able to handle it again."

Red looked at him, incredulous.

"You'd trust me that far?"

"I'm usually a pretty good judge of character," Monty said simply. "Cherry and Tara think you're the man for the job. Tara saw you in action, last night. Mac would never have gotten back—nor Tara, I'm afraid, but for you. That means plenty to me."

BOTH TURNED at the sound of horses' hoofs. Half a dozen riders were approaching, Whitey in the lead, wearing a deputy town marshal's star. Farther away, on the Trail, the dust of a big herd could be seen now. Whitey and his men pulled to a stop, remaining in their saddles, spread out dangerous. Here was some ruse, Red decided.

"Well?" Monty Irving barked.

"Howdy, Monty," Whitey nodded. "We ain't lookin' for no trouble today. We're just after this hombre, who's a newcomer to this range, and a trouble-maker. Murdered Diamond last night."

"Yeah?" Monty was thin-lipped. "Get the hell out of here!"

"You better come along quiet and peaceful, Hamilton," Whitey warned. "We're going to take you, dead or alive. We'd rather do it alive, but that's up to you. Don't try to interfere with the law, Monty. If you do, you'll get hurt."

"Law?" Monty barked. "There's no law in that town. And if there was, you've no authority out here."

"These persuaders make mighty good law," Whitey reminded. "And we've got the pair of you covered."

It was true, Red saw. Shifting their horses restlessly, a couple of the crew had managed it, being out of sight just long enough to draw and aim. Now the others were doing the same.

It was a bold stroke, and plainly Black Jack's idea. If he could get hold of Red by a quick surprise move, he figured to have won half the fight. Though Red had a hunch that Black Jack would not have counted on this, that it was a ruse, to divert them from something bigger.

"You see," Whitey added. "You ain't got much choice! If it comes to shootin', you'll both be out of luck!"

Whitey's triumphant grin vanished as a rifle thundered from the house, and his hat was twitched clear off his head by the heavy-caliber bullet. Cherry's voice snapped even while the echoes rang.

"Drop your guns, you lice, or I'll shoot to kill! And there's two other rifles on you."

"One from here, behind you," Jinny's voice came from a crack in the big barn doors. And Tara spoke from the opposite corner of the house.

Whitey's pallid face was pasty. With one impulse, his men loosed their guns, jerked their arms skyward. Red promptly stepped forward and lifted their extra weapons.

"Get!" he ordered. "And don't set foot on Barrier again!"

As they galloped for town, Monty mopped at his face with a big handkerchief.

"Girls," he said. "I take back anything I've said before. You three are worth any six men I ever knew."

"And that's puttin' it mildly," Red concurred. "You sure got us out of a tight, that time."

"I just wanted to show you, Red," Cherry said sweetly, "that it was an accident, yesterday. I can put my bullets where I want them."

There came pounding hoofbeats

again, but this rider was a Barrier man, on a lathered horse. His voice was hoarse.

"There's trouble, north of the canyon," he gasped, sliding to a stop. "That big bunch from Texas that just came up the trail, and there's all of four thousand head in it, they're headin' west, now that they're above the canyon. Headin' at a dead run, spreadin' out with their drivers stampedin' 'em. That way, they'll be all around our bunch and mixed with it soon. I tried to turn 'em back, and they pumped lead at me. Most of our crew's off south."

RED HAD SEEN enough of the country to know what that meant. Here was the real trick that Black Jack had planned, with this arrest intended chiefly as a diversion. He had made a deal, probably days or weeks ahead, with some unscrupulous trail boss, and now, instead of keeping straight on up the trail until they were safely beyond the Barrier, they had stampeded the herd west, to mingle with and encompass the main herds of the Barrier itself.

Once that was done, they would figure to keep the whole bunch moving north, with the Barrier beef added. And to try and get them back, after such a bold stroke, would likely mean a running gunfight with a tough crew of Texans who were spoiling for a scrap. Yet if they got away with it, Black Jack would have struck a crippling blow at the Barrier.

"We've got to get word to the rest of the crew, get them up there fast," Monty jerked out. "Curly, get a fresh horse and get them on the jump. We'll get up there, Red—"

"And we'll be right with you," Cherry called, running out, rifle under her arm.

Red hesitated, shook his head.

"No," he said. "You asked me to take over as foreman, Monty. If you still want me, I'll do it—but I want you to stay here, with the girls. And have half the crew come here and stay, too. If you go up there now, that's playin' into their hands. I'll go, and we'll see what we can do. The herds'll be mixed long before we can stop them, in any case. But if we pull everybody away from here, they'll move in here—kill Mac, and likely burn us out. You stick here, whatever happens. I'll handle the other end of it."

Monty hesitated for a moment, then nodded agreement.

"Sounds like the best plan," he conceded.

"I'll go tell the others," Jinny said decisively. "You stay here, Curly."

Before any one could protest, she was gone. Red swung to saddle and put his horse to a steady trot which would eat up the miles. There was no point in getting there too far ahead of the Barrier crew, and it would take Jinny considerable extra time to bring them. The first round had to be conceded to Black Jack.

He was winning by a trick, and from Black Jack's point of view, it was perfect. The Texans would do the work, taking their reward from Barrier beef. If they got past here, they would be safe enough. The Barrier brand would be vented, and, up in Montana or Wyoming, those cattle would sell as readily as any of the others, with no questions asked. The thing had happened times enough already, and would happen again, until the honest cowmen were roused sufficiently to demand and get uniform brand laws.

Crossing the canyon, Red had a good view of what was going on. The main Barrier herd had been grazing quietly, a good five miles west of the trail, watched by one or two cowboys to see that they did not stray too close to the moving herds.

Then the trail bunch, stampeded wildly westward, had spread like a fan, enveloping them in its sweep, the leaders being gradually headed northward again. Now there were cattle spread for miles, mixed hopelessly and milling wildly. What had happened to the other Barrier men there was no sure way of know-

ing, but it was easy to guess, since they were nowhere to be seen.

THE FIRST job was done, the herd was past its first panic, being gradually formed into a trail bunch again. Red's jaw set hard at sight of the crew who were doing this. There were at least two score of them, and they were arrogantly confident in their own might. They outnumbered all Barrier men by at least two to one.

That was another point which Black Jack would be counting on: that the Barrier would not take this loss lying down, but would make a try at getting their own back. Which could only lead to a pitched gun battle. However that turned out would be of scant interest to Black Jack. For once they were engaged, he would figure to sweep in and grab the unprotected ranch, knowing that, once he had it, the remnants of crew which returned from that battle with the rustlers would be unable to take it back.

It was that which Red had to guard against, first of all. He slowed, studying the situation. The original herd of four thousand had been increased at this one gulp to half as many again, and they made a vast and impressive spectacle, sunshine gleaming on horns amid the film of dust which overlay the whole area for miles, with the uneasy bawling of the cattle like the steady roll of far-off thunder.

Presently he saw the Barrier riders, ten of them, besides Jinny, who was coming with them. Coming into sight above the rim of the canyon, off west. Red turned to meet them. They had made a fast run, and their horses showed it. Now they watched angrily as the big herd was gradually calmed and bunched again, slowly being turned into the north.

"Ain't we going to do nothin' but set here and watch 'em get away with it?" one of the men demanded impatiently as Red joined them but made no move to get started. Jinny had introduced him as acting foreman.

"What would you do?" Red asked.

"Go after them. And go a-shooting."

"Now's no time for that. That's what they're hoping we will do. They'd whittle us down, and to no good purpose. We haven't a big enough crew for that."

"You said to send half the men back to the ranch house," Jinny reminded, watching him.

"And there they'll stay. If we pulled them away from there and got in a fight up here, Black Jack and his men would move in on us and be permanent guests. And they'd get that arrogant, they'd consider themselves as hosts, and not very hospitable ones, if we tried to come back."

"That ain't no excuse for not even puttin' up a fight, when we're being robbed blind," the same cowboy growled. "Oh don't you want a fight?"

"That depends," Red said calmly. "I like to have at least a chance to win, when I start one. So I guess we'll just wait for evening. Those cattle are tired, and won't go much farther today. Give them a chance to cool off and settle down."

"Which won't make it any easier. The numbers'll still be the same." the rebel looked at Jinny, appealed to her. "I vote for going ahead and makin' a scrap of it right now, Miss Jinny. Do we have to take this hombre's orders? Looks to me like he's still a friend of Black Jack, and playin' his game with him."

"I'm still a friend of Black Jack's," Red agreed, unruffled. "But doing that *would* be playing his game."

Jinny surveyed him for a moment, nodded.

"Dad says he's foreman," she announced decisively. "And he saved Mac and Tara last night. Even Cherry vouches for him. So I guess he's boss."

"But what do you think about it, Miss Jinny? We're takin' orders from you—right now!"

"Red's boss," Jinny repeated. "If

he says to sit here till evening, then we'll sit."

"No need to do that," Red said. "Ride back to the buildings and get something to eat. Come evening, we'll see what we can do."

THEY hesitated, hating the decision, yet uneasily recognizing that it was sensible. They swung their horses, but Red made no move to go with them. After a moment, Jinny waved them on, but sat her own horse unmoving.

"You've got a scheme of some sort," she said shrewdly.

"Sort of, yes," Red agreed. "We can't beat them by force. If we tried it, that would be playing Black Jack's game, and we'd lose, no matter how we came out here. It wouldn't do."

"But if you don't use force, how do you propose to get the cattle back? They won't give them up without a fight—not after a play like they've made."

"Reckon you're right, there."

His eyes were musingly on the distant herd, now settling to some semblance of its former order. Jinny moved impatiently.

"Can't you find anything else to look at?" she challenged directly.

Slowly, Red turned, eyeing her. He saw the quick flush, half of anger and defiance, but her eyes remained steady, challenging. Red smiled slowly, and her white teeth flashed momentarily as she bit her lip.

"You're laughing at me now," she charged.

"Nope, I was just thinkin' that you're pretty high-spirited, and aim to get what you want," Red contradicted.

"And you think I won't get it?"

"I didn't say that. You're pretty as they come, and ought to be able to get just about anything you want. Sometimes, though, the best way to get a thing is to sort of take your time."

Jinny moved impatiently. Her eyes showed sullen.

"That's well enough to talk about, but what does it get you?" she argued. "I've been doing that, playing the part of a meek little sister—so what happens? I'm just the kid sister, and no one knows yet that I'm through with pigtails and dolls. No one knows that I'm alive." She slapped viciously at a horse-fly.

"Who did you want to know that you were alive?"

She smiled at him suddenly.

"You might do, for one," she suggested.

Red returned the smile, slowly, gravely.

"Be hard to forget that you were around, I guess," he conceded.

"Now you're treating me like a child, the same as the rest of them do. I could like you—but I can see that it's hopeless already. How she does it, I don't know, but Cherry's got you looped and hog-tied. And Tara has finally got *her* eyes open to what she's been missing all along!"

So that was it! Jinny had been in love with Mac, or at least she had fancied that she was, and, looking at her closely, Red suspected that there was probably a lot more than fancy here. Everyone had been looking upon Jinny, as she said, as a little girl who still played with dolls, but she was a woman, hot-headed and angry at the whole world. There was change and excitement all around her, the world she had known, though she might not realize how or why, was in a state of flux. And she was of no mind to be left out in the march of events.

Jinny colored hotly, meeting his glance, but her eyes were still sullen, defiant.

"Tara could have married Black Jack," she flung out. "And she's been thinking that she wanted to, for a long while now! So why didn't she go ahead and do it? That would have solved all our problems—and whatever else you may say, about him, he's a man!"

"Yes," Red agreed. "Black Jack's a man, all right. But Tara got her eyes opened. Playin' with fire can

be a mighty hot business, sometimes."

"Are we going to stay here all day?" Jinny demanded. "And if that remark was meant for me, Mr. Red Hamilton, you can save your breath. I'm tired of playing third fiddle, and a fire can be mighty warming when you're freezing on a cold day!"

CHAPTER X

THEY RODE back to the buildings, almost in silence. The outburst would probably do her good, Red figured. Jinny had been at least half in love with Mac, who had never even noticed her—save as a kid sister. She had had to blow off steam, and because he was new, she could tell him things which she wouldn't have mentioned to any of the old hands on Barrier.

The crew were lounging about, impatient, spoiling for a fight. But Monty gave his whole-hearted approval.

"You used your head, Red," he agreed. "But how do you figure to do things this evenin'? Ride up about dark with every gun we have, and give them the choice of doing as we say, or having their whole bunch stampeded to hell and breakfast?"

"That wouldn't be such a bad idea," Red conceded. "And we could do it. Trouble is, it wouldn't get us anywhere. We couldn't cut our cattle till tomorrow, and they'd be right on hand to put up a fight about it. So we wouldn't have gained much."

"Mebbe not. But what do you figure on?"

"I'm going up there, myself, soon as they're bedded for the night, and have a talk with the trail boss. Maybe I won't get anywhere, but it'll do no harm to try. I don' see how we can win by force, right now. If we pull our crew away from here, Black Jack'll march in and take over. No chance to hire more men from Drove City. They'd play his game. And such law as there is, he's it."

"Yeah. He's sheriff, as well as town marshal. But they won't listen to you alone."

"I'll have a try at it—alone," Red repeated.

Cherry came out of the house, wearing a dress now and apron, her sleeves rolled up, flour on her arms. Her eyes were grave.

"I hope you know what you're doing, Red," she said. "Some of the boys don't much trust you—but I want you to know that I do."

"Thanks," Red smiled. "I won't forget that, Cherry."

"And you won't forget to come back, will you—and all in one piece?" She tried to smile gaily, but there was a quick look in her eyes which she could not quite hide.

"I'll aim to do that, too," Red agreed. "Did I ever tell you that cherries are my favorite fruit?" He leaned from the saddle, his voice suddenly urgent.

"Whatever you do, all of you stick around here close tonight—and sleep with one eye open! I want to find things here all in one piece when I get back, too."

He knew that she was watching him as he rode away. Not in all the years since he could remember, had there been anyone who really cared whether he returned or not. Somehow, it made a difference.

THE DUST stirred along the great trail had settled, sunset glow gave a mellow richness which shut away the drab outlines of the day. He was past the Barrier now, and he circled around two trail herds bedding for the night. Off to the west from the trail, well away from these others, Red saw the vastly bigger bulk of the herd which had swallowed such a chunk of their own, caught the winking glow of the dying cook fire.

There sounded the lazy plunk of a banjo, the voices of many cowboys joining in. Ordinarily, these men would be in Drove City, or, failing that, already in their blankets, since the long trail starved men for sleep. But the crew were all here, prob-

ably puzzled by the absence of trouble, but confident that it would come. A thin sickle of moon was hoisting itself above the horizon.

Men were coming to their feet, then sinking warily down again as they saw that only one lone horseman approached. Eyes sharpened at the sight of the Barrier brand, an upthrust, halting hand, which his cayuse wore.

Disregarding them, Red swung down, dropping the reins. The banjo and singing were only a memory.

"Who's boss here?" Red challenged.

A big man, seated on the wagon tongue of the chuck wagon, arose and lounged forward. He was full as big and beefy as Black Jack himself, but with none of the softness of easy living about his face and middle. He was thin-lipped and watchful.

"I am," he said, and waited.

"I'm Red Hamilton," Red said easily. "Have I ever seen you before?"

As he had hoped, his name was a shock to them. Evidently they had heard of him, probably in connection with Black Jack, and it looked as if they hadn't heard of his break with the boss of Drove City. The trail boss looked uncertain.

"Red Hamilton?" he repeated. "I've heard of you. I'm Panhandle Ellis."

"I've heard of you, too," Red acknowledged. "Folks call you the Boss of the Texas Trail."

"Yeah. You ridin' a Barrier cayuse tonight?"

"Not only tonight. Regular I'm ramroddin' for the Barrier. That was bad stampede you had today. Your bunch must be plumb skittish."

"They're quiet enough to suit me!"

"That so? Well, you know, of course, that you got a lot of our herd. I suppose you aim to cut 'em out and bring 'em back, come morning?"

"Mebby a few strays got mixed in," Panhandle acknowledged. "If they did, that's just yore bad luck. We can't be bothered with anything like that."

"No? I don't call a couple thousand head a few strays. And I took you for a cattleman, too. Always heard you was."

Panhandle bristled.

"What makes you think any diff'rent?" he challenged.

"YOU'RE actin like a sheepman. Every cattleman knows that Monty Irving has been a mighty good friend to all other cattlemen, leaving a free trail through the Barrier."

Red suffused Panhandle's face, his big fists clenched.

"I don't like that crack about sheep," he said. 'If you're ramroddin' the Barrier, that's all I want to know about you. We ain't cuttin' out no strays. What you going to do about it?"

"I'll tell you," Red said amicably. "You know who I am. I didn't know who was boss here, but I figgered it'd be quite a man. Being you makes it better. You're counted as the toughest fighter, guns or fists, and there's other things said about you—like about sheepherders. But everybody agrees on one thing, your word's good."

"What the devil you drivin' at?" Panhandle growled.

"This. You been lookin' for a fight, over this herd you rustled. Well, I came up here to give it to you. I'll fight you, man to man, no guns. If I lick you, then, in the morning, you'll cut out every head of stock that belongs to the Barrier, and return them in good order. But if you lick me, you can drive on, and we won't bother you. You want a fight, so that's a fair offer."

Panhandle stared at him. Then his face creased in an unpleasant grin.

"If that's the way you want it, it'll be the easiest fight I ever figgered on, for such a stake," he agreed. "You've named your poison. Now see if you can drink it."

Already, he was unbuckling his

gun-belt, tossing it and his coat to one side. Red did the same, unruffled despite the supremely confident air of the Texan. It was make or break, not alone for him, but for the Barrier as well. And, whether Panhandle realized it or not, for all the cattlemen who were bringing herds along the big trail.

But there was one thing in his favor which Panhandle didn't know about. There was somebody, waiting back at the ranchhouse, waiting for him to come back all in one piece. Somebody with flour on her arms and anxiety in her eyes, who, though she could ride and shoot with any man of them, was very womanly despite it all. And that, Red decided, was all the odds that any man could ask for.

CHAPTER XI

"READY?" Panhandle asked, and he leaned a little forward, long arms hanging, like a gorilla. At Red's nod, he rushed suddenly, lashing out with a pile-driver fist which slid harmlessly over Red's shoulder, and before he could recover, Red caught him on the ear with a blow which spun him half-around, staggering.

But while he had drawn first blood, Red knew this would be no easy fight. Panhandle hadn't won his title as boss of the trail without working for it, and taking on all comers. He spun on around, and this time his left found its mark, with a terrific jolt behind it. But not until Red had landed a second time, this time on Panhandle's nose.

Then, while the crew made a tense circle and watched, they went at it. Red had a little more science than his opponent, but it was offset by superior weight and a seasoned toughness which made the man like a hunk of India rubber. He seemed to be able to absorb blows which would hurt most men, to shrug them off.

But Red had been toughened in the same hard school, and was just as fit. There were no rounds, no time. It was keep at it until one or the other of them could not stand up. Red saw that he was at least holding his own, that some of his blows were beginning to hurt.

And about time, he reflected grimly, for his breath was becoming a painful thing, his knuckles were raw and bleeding, and he knew that he'd feel the after-effects of Panhandle's fists for days after this. But the Texan was in no better state. He had slowed a lot; he too, was breathing in great painful gasps, and weariness had come to his shifting glance.

Suddenly he altered his tactics. again with amazing speed for so big a man. Red supposed that he was clinching to escape punishment and get his breath, but almost too late, he realized his mistake. Those arms had closed about him with the impact of the jaws of a steel trap, and Panhandle was making one tremendous play to get him off his feet.

Red saw his danger. His feet were leaving the ground, and in that merciless wrestler's grip he would be hurled over Panhandle's head, to hit the ground like the crack of doom.

Twisting desperately, Red grabbed. His fingers scratched along Panhandle's nose and eyes, finding no hold, then closed on a heavy thatch of hair. Exerting himself supremely, Panhandle heaved, but was himself dragged as remorselessly. The two of them hit the ground in a sprawling pile, and Red knew that the Texan was as badly hurt by it as himself.

They came slowly to their feet again, groggy with exhaustion. Red smashed with all his strength, and Panhandle made no effort to dodge. Instead, he punched back, a blow which, coming a second behind his own, raked along Red's temple and seemed, cumulatively, to have all the force of a club.

But it was almost reflex action on Panhandle's part. Abruptly, his legs buckled, and he crashed down like a falling tree. With a desperate effort, Red kept his own legs steady. The sickle moon danced crazily on the horizon and his head swam as

though the world was buckling, but he held himself upright.

FOR A space of half a minute the silence held. Then men's breaths were expelled, a low buzz of amazement went the rounds. Someone picked up a bucket of water which was half full of potato peelings, splashed it across Panhandle's face and chest.

Groaning, the trail boss stirred, shook himself, and sat up. After a moment, unsteadily, he got to his feet. Unexpectedly, a grin twisted his painful, swollen mouth, and he held out his hand.

"Red," he said. "There's a new boss of the Trail. That's the first time I ever been licked—but you did it. The cattle 'll be cut out and on the way back, before noon tomorrow."

"Thanks," Red agreed, returning the handclasp. "You're some fighter yourself, Panhandle."

Still half-dazed, Red strapped his gun-belt mechanically about his waist again, walked to his horse. Panhandle looked at him.

"Reckon you was right, about me actin' like a sheepman," he acknowledged. "I don't wonder you broke with Black Jack." He motioned sharply. "Four of you boys ride with him. See that he gets home all right. If you feel half as bad as I do, Red, you ain't in no shape for much more fightin'—and I wouldn't put it past that polecat to try and stop you from gettin' home."

Red made no objection. He didn't want to talk. It was an effort to stay on his feet, to pull himself into the saddle. And twice that hard to think clearly. He rode, allowing his horse to pick its own gait, dimly aware that his escort jogged along with him.

Then his head cleared. It was partly the rest, partly time and the cool night air. Not half a mile at the side were the lights of Drove City. Tonight the camp was at its height of glory. Men from two or three big outfits were spending their money there, and trying to get their money's worth. A tough town which ought to be tamed.

Not that he was interested in Drove City—not tonight, at any rate. He felt better now, but he was still sore and tired. He wanted to get on home, get to bed. He turned to the others.

"Thanks, boys," he said. "But you don't need to come any farther. I'll be fine now."

"That's what you think," one of them grinned at him. "But we're going right along with you, hombre! And *you're* going right along with us, too!"

Startled, Red looked more closely at them. He realized now that, for the last few miles, he had been riding mechanically, but that he had been almost out as he rode. That last blow of Panhandle's had been worse than the Texan had even suspected.

And while he rode, oblivious to what was going on around him, things had been happening. These were not the men who had started out with him. There had been four of them, but there were a dozen, now. The thing which Panhandle had feared had happened, but on a larger scale than he had counted on, and more adriotly handled. The speaker grinned wolfishly at him.

"You been asleep as you rode, I guess," he said. "Which was just as well. Them other hombres might as well have been. We slipped up out of the dark and stuck guns in their faces 'fore they knew we was around. So we took over the job of escortin' you—and we'll finish it, right on into Drove City. Yore old friend Black Jack'll be tickled to see you again."

Already they were swinging in toward town. Alert now, Red took swift stock. Black Jack had expected him to make some play tonight, and had had a crew watching every move. His guns were gone, he saw, lifted while he was too dazed to realize what was happening. Casually he shrugged, putting one hand up to feel of his bruised face, and relaxed a little. He still had a gun in a shoulder holster.

That was an ace in the hole, but he'd

have no chance to use it now. Any shoot-out against a dozen men would be hopeless. But soon the odds would be heavier.

BLACK JACK would be glad to see him again, of course! But, regardless of old friendship, this was war. He could expect to be held a prisoner until it was settled one way or the other. He'd be well treated, but there was small consolation in that.

Ahead was something familiar. The saloon, ablaze with light, above which was Doc Griffith's office. It was dark now, and the shadows hung heavy outside here. Red tensed, swung his horse casually a little to the side, drawing his feet from the stirrups. What he was aiming to try was plenty risky, for, rather than see him escape, these fellows wouldn't hesitate to kill him. But they had had too easy a victory, were relaxed now, confident that he was helpless.

The outside stairway was close at hand. Swiftly, Red flung himself at it, was out of the saddle and clattering up the stairs before they knew what was happening. The darkness was heavy here. He reached the top, jerked at the office window, and it came open. Then, without stopping, Red turned, grasped the hand rail, and swung down, dropping to the ground, ducking back under the stairway as the boots of his pursuers thundered up it, above him.

CHAPTER XII

AS SOME stormed into the office and others scurried around the saloon to cut off his retreat that way, Red came out from under the stairs, swung on to his horse again, and rode away. Getting out of town might not be so easy, however. Guards were everywhere, and they would be alert. If he chose to wait another hour or so, until the cattlemen in town started streaming back to their camps, his chances would be improved. But Red was in no mood to wait.

A wind was rising, rattling doors and windows, catching up the dust in little angry swirls. Nearing the outskirts, Red slowed. Another horse was coming at a trot, heading into town. Red timed his own speed accordingly, since the guard would be busy watching this newcomer.

He swung around a corner and saw the startled look on the other man's face, saw the instinctive grab toward a gun, and had his own clear of leather, finger tightening on trigger, before he realized that, under the heavy shadowing hat, it was Black Jack who rode there.

For a moment the two of them faced each other, then Red slipped his own gun back in holster, and Black Jack did the same. A twisted grin lifted the corner of his mouth.

"Fast as ever with a gun, aren't you, Red?" he said. "Lucky for me that you can think fast as ever, too."

"You must be getting jumpy nerves, Jack. Or a suspicious attitude toward everybody. Maybe you're drinking too much."

"Maybe I am," Black Jack agreed. "Just leaving?"

"Just leaving," Red nodded. "Be seeing you, Jack."

"That's right, you will," Black Jack conceded, and watched him ride past the guard and out of town. Red grinned, then the smile froze. What had Black Jack been about, on this nocturnal foray?

Clouds were beginning to pile and tumble, off in the northwest. Red heard the thudding of hoofs of a horse hard-ridden, passing him somewhere in the dark. He couldn't be sure, but it seemed as if this lone rider was heading for Barrier as well.

He reached the buildings, dark now save for one low-turned lamp in the sick room. The nearest corral held one lone horse, a magnificent dark bay gelding, Firebrand. Monty Irving had remarked that he was the only man who had ever been able to ride the horse.

Firebrand stood now with head lowered and heaving flanks, and in the faint light, his sides showed wet with sweat. Had it been Firebrand who had passed him, back on the Trail? And if so, what had Monty been doing, riding in such haste at such an hour?

Red went on toward the barn, leading his horse, halted again. Cherry had slipped out to meet him, and he knew that she had been waiting for him.

"I saw you ride up," she said, and, quick to note the bruises and discoloration on his face, said nothing more for a moment. Only her eyes darkened, and she reached to touch his wrist, lightly. In the gesture was sympathy and understanding beyond words.

"They agreed to bring the cattle back, tomorrow," Red said. "How is Mac?"

"No better, I'm afraid. Doc was out, and I know he's worried. So Tara is nearly frantic. She just sits and watches him, and he doesn't move. He scarcely breathes."

"She'd ought to get some sleep."

"She won't leave him. I wanted to watch tonight, and Dad was in several times, before he went to bed, but Tara keeps blaming herself. She thinks if she hadn't gone into town, it wouldn't have happened."

If Monty had been home all evening, who had passed him on Firebrand? Cherry went past him, paused at the stall of one of the horses. Red could tell that it had not been out of the barn tonight. That was what Cherry wanted to know, apparently, and she seemed relieved at the discovery. But that was Jinny's own saddle-pony.

BLACK JACK DRISCOLL was quick to sense the excitement as he rode deeper into town. Drove City, outwardly calm, bubbled and seethed. Having met Red riding out, he could hazard a guess as to the cause. Going to his office, he summoned Whitey and Bob o'Link for a report. The latter was a ferret-faced man who always looked half asleep, and he had gained his name by arriving in Drove City with the broken link of a handcuff still fettered to his right wrist.

"No need of looking for Red, any longer," Black Jack told them. "But what happened?"

"He went out to call on that bunch from Texas, all alone," Bob o'Link explained. "We was hangin' around, keepin' watch, like you said to do He rode up to their camp fire, 'fore we knew he was around, and challenged Panhandle to a fight. If he licked, Panhandle was to return the Barrier beef, tomorrow. If Panhandle licked him, they could keep the cattle."

Black Jack's eyes glowed.

"Just like Red. What happened?"

"Panhandle agreed; figgered he'd have an easy time of it, I guess. But he got fooled. Damned if Red didn't lick the socks off him."

Black Jack listened in silence to the further account of how they had decided to remedy the situation by making Red a prisoner, and how, safely inside the town, he had somehow given them the slip.

"He's a slippery customer," Black Jack agreed. He sprung up, paced to the window, and stared out, frowning.

"There's a storm coming," he said "And you know what that means. Not sleepy, are you?"

Bob o'Link had been thinking wistfully of bed, but he shook his head promptly.

"Not a bit," he denied. "Not if there's a job to do."

"There's something that you boys should enjoy," Black Jack assured them, and grinned crookedly. "I'll even go along with you, to see that there's no further slip. I'm very much afraid that Red is going to find that his evening's work has been wasted."

PANHANDLE ELLIS was in a surly mood as he turned from watching Red ride away in the night. He had put a good face on the matter, taking his licking like a sportsman, but the thought of the beating he had received, in front of his own crew rankled. And the fact that the whole thing had been foisted upon him against his better judgment made it worse. He was in a mood for trouble, as he turned back, and it looked as if trouble was coming to meet him half way.

Bandy Ness, whose height had shrunk two inches with the years and the gradual bowing of his legs, and whose disposition had warped along with his frame, came forward now,

choking with anger. He pointed a gnarled forefinger at the big man, and his shrill voice crackled with anger.

"Yo're a fine one, ain't yuh, Panhandle?" he charged. "Going and gettin' yoreself licked, an' losin' us fifteen-hundred to two thousan' head uh cattle!"

"Mebby you could have done better?" Panhandle asked, his voice deceptively mild.

"I couldn't have done no worse. And I wouldn't have been fool enough tuh make no such bet in the first place. There ain't nary fighter been born but what somebody else can always lick him. And you're forgettin' that half the bunch belongs to me."

"Nope, I ain't forgettin' it," Panhandle said wearily. "The way you keep cacklin' about it, like a hen that's laid an egg, a man couldn't forget. Nor I ain't forgettin' that it was yore idea in the first place, to grab the Barrier herd, and that you did it while I was off in town, without consultin' me. Though I happen to be trail boss, and don't you go forgettin' that again."

"And a damn poor trail boss you've turned out to be," Bandy snarled. "You liked the idea well as I did, addin' a lot to our herd—"

"I wasn't brung up among sheep, like you were, Bandy. And the Barrier is a cattle ranch. I'd never have agreed if Black Jack had asked me in the first place. Now shut up your yappin' and blattin', for I've stood all I'm going to. There's a storm coming, and we're in for more trouble before morning, or I miss my guess."

Turning on his heel, he routed out several men, posting a double ring of night guards around the herd. By that time, the storm was really on its way. The thunder was increasing to a steady roll, still some distance away, but heading straight toward them. Panhandle knew, from bitter experience, just how unpleasant a sudden night storm could be, to the accompaniment of a big and boogery herd.

And the herd was getting boogery now. Likewise, it was vastly too big to control. Now they had a bunch of trouble on their hands, which was apt to explode at any minute.

THE DOUBLED guards were riding steadily around the fringes of the herd, singing at the top of their voices, but the mounting roll of thunder drowned them out. A few big drops of rain spattered down, making little pops of dust where the grass had been trampled out of sight. A black cloud was overhead now, poised like a club. Panhandle rode to the chuck wagon, where the swearing cook was reheating the coffee in anticipation of what was to come. He ducked out of sight inside the wagon, and Panhandle poured himself a steaming cup, gulped half of it, and turned to look up at the cloud above.

"Looks like trouble, eh, Panhandle?"

Panhandle spun about at the sound, almost dropping his cup. Part of the hot liquid spilled across his wrist, and lips tightened. Black Jack sat his horse, only a half dozen paces away, leaning a little forward, a big gun leveled across the saddle-horn.

"Well?" Panhandle spat, though he knew the answer already. He tried a slow, tentative step forward.

"You were a fool, Panhandle—and you've lost," Black Jack told him softly. "And you aren't going to throw that coffee in my eyes."

As he spoke, he pressed the trigger, twice. Flame spurted from the gun-muzzle, and Panhandle took another slow step forward, the cup still clutched in his fingers but spilling laxly now. This time he did not feel the sting of the hot liquid.

As though that had been a signal, other guns were ripping out a crescendo of sound in a big half-circle around the boogery herd, and, coming above and over-riding it all, a giant lance of flame spilled out of the black cloud above, lancing down like an avenging sword. The shaking thunder of it collapsed all other sound and engulfed it as though it had never been. With the lightning came the rain, a sweeping sheet that seemed almost solid, and the whole herd, with one impulse, had turned and was surging blindly off into the

pitch darkness which had suddenly come upon the land.

Yelling and swearing, Bandy was poking his head out from a tent, unable to see, the ineffectual glow of the lantern which he had just lit being worse than nothing. He started at Black Jack's voice almost beside him.

"Let's get back inside, Bandy. Nothing to worry about."

Bandy ducked back, and Black Jack followed him in. The tent was a small one, which Bandy had insisted he must have on account of rheumatism. Inside, with water starting to run in little rivulets across the dusty floor, drumming on the roof and coming through the soaked canvas in a fine mist, they faced each other.

"Wet, isn't it?" said Black Jack. "A fine night for frogs."

"What you doing here?" Bandy demanded.

"Saving things for you. The herd's stampeded, and the way they're headin', they'll tangle with two-three other trail herds before they stop running. By morning, there'll be the nicest mix-up you've seen this side of Texas."

"This side of hell, you mean," Bandy said, a little appalled at the vision of ten or fifteen thousand head in one vast milling bunch. Then he chuckled. "Panhandle 'll have his hands full, without tryin' to cut out that Barrier bunch."

"You'll have your hands full, you mean," Black Jack corrected. "Looks like you'd have to act as trail boss from here on out. But keeping those extra dogies should be worth it."

BANDY eyed his visitor carefully, but he asked no questions. He had heard those shots, and while they could easily have meant anything, he had no desire for details. Already the swift thought had come to him, that now this whole herd would belong to him. True, Panhandle might have heirs, somewhere in Texas, but by the time Montana was reached, it wouldn't be necessary to worry about them.

Black Jack could see the thought passing through Bandy's mind. He had gauged his man accurately when he had first talked with him and broached the original scheme, days before. The added fact that, as sheriff and town marshal, he had a reward notice reposing in his desk, which gave varied and interesting information about a character of another name, but who was indubitably Bandy, made him doubly sure.

"By morning," Black Jack added. "The whole mixed-up bunch will be a good many miles farther away from the Barrier. I don't think that Red Hamilton will come after you with his crew. If he does, you've men enough to handle them."

"You're damn right I have," Bandy cackled. The prospect of a herd of six thousand head, suddenly all his own, was dazzling. "I'm hangin' on to them, don't worry none about that!"

"I'm not," Black Jack chuckled. "Looks like you're in for a wet night of it. And since I'll be soaked before I get home anyway, I might as well start now as later. Keep your powder dry!"

"I'll do that," Bandy agreed. "And I guess you know enough about that ex-pardner of yore's to do the same!"

"I sure do," Black Jack agreed. "The main thing I regret is that I won't be able to see his face in the morning."

He went outside, found his horse, and turned homeward. The rain was still descending in torrents, but, aside from the thunder, now gradually rumbling away in the distance, the night had grown silent. The big herd was gone—still lumbering ahead with an earth-shaking jar of hoofs, descending upon other boogery herds and enveloping them and men alike, adding to the confusion, rolling rough-shod over whatever chanced to be in their way.

Chuck wagons shook to the impact, tipped, were overthrown, sprawled across, the frenzied bawling of fallen cattle being quickly smothered beneath the trampling hoofs, the cry of a fallen man or squeal of a horse all overridden. Before the gray dawn came, not two or three more, but seven extra herds had been engulfed, and in that misty dawn, scattered over mile upon mile of sodden prairie,

hopelessly mixed, were a dozen brands and twenty thousand head of Texas beef.

CHAPTER XIII

THE STEADY drip of rain from the eaves, and lash of it against the window awoke Red, and it sounded in his ears like a soothing lullaby. For a few minutes he lay, luxuriating in the chance to do so, conscious that he was stiff and sore all over from the effects of Panhandle's mighty fists.

By now, he reflected, Panhandle would be busy, after a wet and unpleasant night, beginning the task of cutting out the cattle. Everything and everybody would be soaked, the cattle unruly and bent on stubborn mischief.

Mac seemed worse. Red could tell it as soon as he entered the sick room. Mac was conscious, but half-delirious with fever, and the wound showed red and ugly. Tara was there, and her presence, her hand on his forehead, seemed to quiet Mac when nothing else could.

Doc Granger was pulling up already, which testified to his own anxiety. And bursting with news as well.

"I pity those poor devils on the Trail," he said. "Last night that big bunch stampeded, and before it stopped, they'd tangled with a lot of other bunches. Twenty thousand head to be cut out, in this sort of weather. And at least three of that Texas bunch dead, includin' the trail boss, Panhandle."

"Dead?" Red said sharply. "How do you mean?"

"Just dead, is all I mean," Doc grinned. "Nothing for me to do for any of them. Two of the poor devils got caught in the herd. Not much left of them. Panhandle hadn't been trampled, but somebody had filled him full of lead, right there in camp. The Marshal's out investigatin' this morning." He shrugged eloquently.

Red reached for his slicker. Already, he could pretty well piece the story together. Here was more of Black Jack's work, and if any of the Barrier herd ever set foot on Barrier range again, it would be a surprise to Black Jack—and, Red admitted grimly, maybe a surprise to him, too.

Monty was reaching for his own slicker as well.

"You'll need a crew today, Red," he said.

Red shook his head.

"A crew'd be less use than ever, today," he pointed out. "And whatever happens, the Barrier must be guarded, day and night. If it comes to a choice between that and the herd, it's more important."

"That's so—but you won't be popular down there, alone."

"I'll have a look," said Red. "It'll take a week to start untanglin' things anyway, now."

In the covering storm, Red reached the big herd by mid-forenoon. It had taken that long for the various outfits concerned to bring up their chuck wagons, their cavvies and all the rest, to where the big herd was still spread out, and they were busy getting organized in readiness for the job of rounding up, cutting, separating the various bunches. A long job, made doubly miserable by the steady pelting of the rain.

Bandy, looking less incongruous in the saddle, was leaning forward, oblivious of the wet, having his own forceful say as Red rode up.

"That's that, then. For us, there's three brands to watch for. The Hawkeye, the Barrier and the Crazy T. They all go in our bunch."

"How come?" one of the other trail-bosses demanded. "How do you get all this Barrier beef?"

"We made a deal," Bandy explained briefly, and fixed a cold eye on his questioner. "You anything to say about it?"

Since Bandy's crew was more than double that of any other single outfit. his questioner shook his head.

"Hell, no. Makes no difference to me."

"Happens it does to me, though." Red rode forward. "I'm boss of the Barrier. And I'm here to see that Barrier beef is cut into a separate bunch."

BANDY turned on him with a snarl, noting that he seemed to

have come alone. Bandy had been expecting him.

"Listen, hombre," he barked. "You bluffed Panhandle yesterday, but I'm ramroddin' this outfit today. And we ain't standin' for no foolin'. Get that?"

Eyes centered, curiously, on Red. The word had spread, of that epic battle of the evening before, in which this man had thrashed the Boss of the Trail. The fact that Panhandle had been murdered during the night made it all the more interesting.

"There's a lot of men here," Red said casually. "Cattlemen, from the look of them. And every outfit here has come across Barrier territory, no longer ago than yesterday. Come across without let or hindrance, because Monty Irving is a square-shooting man. I take it that those of you who are real men, appreciate a thing like that."

"We sure do, Hamilton," one trail boss spoke up. "Last time I was along up the Trail was two years ago. There was a lot of open country, east of Drove, then. You could go anywhere you liked for near a hundred miles. Now the homesteaders have swarmed in like flies, and that's all closed. I was just thinkin' what a devil of a mess we'd be in, if Barrier wanted to be ornery."

"And it'll bear more thinkin' about," Red said flatly. "There's interests in Drove City that are tryin' to get control of Barrier, by hook or crook. If they get it, they aim to close it to every herd that comes up the trail—unless you pay toll to cross. A dollar a head."

A growl went up from most of the assembled cattlemen. Such a thing would be highway robbery, and yet they could see how it might be done.

"What's that got to do with us?" Bandy barked.

"Plenty. Barrier's been letting every herd pass, free. All that Monty's asked is that you push them along and keep them from spreading out any more than necessary. Most of you have done that. But this two-bit outfit swung west yesterday, as soon as they were above the canyon. Stampeded their bunch and swept up a couple thousand of our herd. And I guess that Bandy's just been telling you that they aim to keep them."

Bandy squirmed uneasily, under the looks cast at him. He tried to bluster.

"That ain't the way of it. Panhandle made a deal, and paid good money—"

"Try to lay it on a dead man. Every man in your own crew knows that he agreed it was a steal, and agreed to cut them out and bring them back today. Is there a man of your crew who'll deny it, at the request of a sheepman like you?"

Bandy glared, turning his look on the others. But his own men made no move to corroborate his story.

"I'm here to help, till these bunches are all straightened out," Red added. "I'll bring a few extra men. I figure that, as cattlemen, you're standin' with the best friend the cattlemen have in this country."

"You can bet your last cent on that," the first trail-boss, who had challenged Bandy, nodded vigorously. "You anything more to say, hombre?"

"It's a hold-up, but I guess I ain't got no choice," Bandy said unhappily. "What with the bill of sale being all shot to hell, there in Panhandle's pockets. Funny, him gettin' shot that way."

"Damn funny," another man agreed quietly. "And if there's any more such killing goes on, while we're doing this job, I'm in favor of startin' in on rustlers, stringin' them up, then headin' back to that sink-hole of a Drove City and cleanin' it out in the bargain. And I reckon all the boys are right with me!"

A SWELLING growl of approval went up. Bandy paled and looked hastily around for his own crew. Then, as the work began, he consoled himself with the idea that, despite this set-back, his holdings had doubled over night, in any case.

The work went forward steadily. Red brought two more men from Barrier with a string of cutting ponies. By night, despite the rain, a good start had been made, but it was doubly difficult now, for each separately divided bunch had to be held, and an-

other stampede could undo all that had been accomplished. But the rain had stopped, as evening came on, the cattle were tired, and the night passed without incident.

By the third evening, with the husk task drawing well past the half-way point, and the weather definitely better, every man who could be spared rode into Drove City for a few hours of relaxation. Red went with them. He wasn't interested in the town, but several of them had asked him to come along. A sort of armed truce existed between the big cattle camp and the town, following the blunt warning of the cowboys to take the town apart if there was any repetition of what had gone before.

The bunch of them swept into Golden Argus, already full. Red seated himself at a small table and looked the room over. He was there when Black Jack came in. Catching sight of Red, he advanced, smiling, and sank into a chair opposite him.

"This is like old times, Red," he declared. "But aren't you drinking anything? What'll it be?"

"I don't do much drinking any more, Jack. Thanks just the same."

"Any more?" Black Jack snorted. "You never did. I always had to do it for both of us. Aren't you even gambling tonight?"

"Only in coming to your town, Jack."

"And that should be enough, eh? How about a little game, just between the two of us?"

"Suit yourself," Red agreed, and Black Jack whipped out a fresh deck of cards, dealt, and they played for a while. Suddenly he looked up, smiling.

"How about making this interesting?" he asked. "I've got a proposition that would do it."

"Yes?"

"I made a bad mistake in getting you down here, Red. I should have known that you'd never change, like I did. But I hate to be fighting you. So let's cut for the high card. If I win, you quit. And if you win, I'll quit, and the Barrier will have nothing more to worry about."

Red considered it for a moment. It was a fair offer, from Black Jack's point of view—more than a fair offer. He was staking everything on the turn of a card. Red shook his head.

"That's too much to gamble on, Jack."

"Too much? I didn't think the stakes came high enough for you, ever. I remember some games you've sat in—and how about the other night? You gambled plenty, against Panhandle."

"Not particularly," Red denied. "There's a lot of difference between the turn of a card, and a chance to fight."

Black Jack grinned wryly.

"I guess there is, at that—with you doing the fighting. Well, it was an idea, anyway—"

HE STOPPED, turning suddenly, hand half going to his holstered gun, then checking the motion in mid-air. A gun had blasted, short and savage, sending a man coughing redly and stumbling to sprawl on the floor, his own gun barely clear of leather. One of Black Jack's gun guards.

Above the crash of the gun, a domineering voice boomed out commandingly, and suddenly there were five men, two at one end of the long room, near the door, one at each of the other sides—men with half-masks across their faces, guns in their hands, covering the crowd.

"Anybody that wants to die, try for a gun and see how quick you get accommodated," the big man by the door rasped. He stood, eyes glittering mockingly from behind the mask, "This is a stick-up," he went on. "And if some of yuh hombres figger yuh're tough, you can try eatin' lead!"

The surprise, save for the one guard who had tried to do something, had been complete. No one moved now, beyond a shuffling of uneasy feet and turning of heads. Five guns, situated as they were to catch the whole room in a cross-fire, were too deadly to buck. Though one more man, drawing good pay against just such an eventuality, tried to earn his money. He raised up suddenly from behind the shelter of the bar, a sawed-off shotgun in his hands, but the gun of the leader blasted him be-

fore he could fire, toppling him across the bar, where he sprawled, an ugly stain spreading along the top.

"Anybody else want some?" the bandit mocked. He picked up the dropped shotgun, holding it ready to send a blast at anyone. "Keep yore hands high!" he warned. "Tony, frisk them for guns."

No one made any protest as the guns were collected.

"Next round, it'll be yore money," the boss warned gruffly. "Be ready tuh shell out!"

Red's eyes ranged the room. There were a lot of men here just off the long trail, as salty a bunch as could be found anywhere under one roof. But that was not enough against such odds. The Argus was too well lighted to blast out the lights. Black Jack gave up his own guns along with the rest.

"Looks like we're caught, this time, Red," he said.

It was an unfortunate moment to speak. Or perhaps it was that the leader really looked at them for the first time at that moment. He took a quick step forward, and a change came over his face—a look of surprise, of elation.

"Well, well," he said gloatingly. "Look what yuh find when yuh turn a stone over! I'll be damned if it ain't the tin star boys! This is shore an unexpected pleasure!"

"Not half as much so, as it will give me to see you hung for this," Black Jack shrugged.

"Hung, eh? That's an idea, but I got a better one. I been hopin' tuh meet up with the pair o' yuh, for a long spell now. Mebby yuh don't know me. We met up in Montana, at Snowshoe. Yuh was wearin' a deppity's badge then, Black Jack, and yore pardner was the marshal!"

SHARP silence gripped the room. Red recalled this heavy-set leader now, another such hold-up, which he and Black Jack had broken up. This fellow had gotten away. Most of the others had not.

"I been hopin' tuh meet up with the pair of yuh, ever since," the outlaw went on vindictively. "Yuh killed my brother that night! I promised I'd get the two of yuh—and luck's with me, tuhnight!"

"Luck is what you might call a relative thing," Black Jack said casually. "You seemed to be having all the luck that night, till one of you made a wild shot and ruined a big mirror behind the bar. That started trouble."

"Yeah? Tryin' tuh scare me? Seven years bad luck for bustin' a mirror, and that sort of rot? Hell, I busted that chunk of glass, and I never had as good pickings as it's been since then."

Deliberately, he swung the sawed-off shotgun, pulled both triggers. The room shook to the concussion, and the big mirror, Black Jack's pride and joy, shattered into a thousand pieces. Black Jack paled in fury.

"Damn you, you'll pay for that!" he shouted. "That's one thing I don't permit—"

"Shut up!" the bandit rasped. "Yuh ain't permittin' nothin' around here tonight. Go ahead an' get their money, Tony. Then we'll be ready tuh move, when I settle with these two. And don't fool yoreselves any, you two law dogs. I'm settlin', before we leave."

Silence fell again while Tony made the rounds. It was a respite, but that was all. Red recognized that this was as tight a spot as he or Black Jack had ever been in. And there seemed little enough that they could do about it.

Black Jack had sunk back on to the edge of his chair, breathing hard. The killing of a couple of his gunmen didn't worry him half so much as the destruction of that big mirror. But he too, realized now that this man intended to murder them as a climax to the robbery.

The gunny-sack was bulging with loot as the job ended. The bandit leader's voice crackled.

"Are you two standin' up for this, or do yuh prefer to take it settin' down? For I'm going to kill the pair of yuh!"

He laid aside the shotgun, fondled his big revolver. Black Jack glanced at Red, shrugged, and they stood up together. Black Jack's lips curled.

"We never took anything lying down, hombre!" he said. "And we're sure not beginning now!"

CHAPTER XIV

"MAYBE that's yore notion of it!" the outlaw snarled. "But when I get through with yuh, you'll be lyin' down, and don't forget it none!"

He took several slow steps forward, while the other four bandits watched the crowd warily. A line had formed as men fell back, leaving a clear space between the two and the outlaw. Now, at a nod from him, Tony came to stand beside him.

"I'm goin' tuh shoot you first, Red," the bandit growled. "You was Marshal, there at Snowshoe. But yuh'll be right along with him, Black Jack. Yuh got anything to say, first?"

"Not to you," Red shrugged. He turned to Black Jack. "It's been nice seeing you again, Jack."

"That goes double, Red. But this seems to be it, eh?"

"Guess it is," Red agreed.

They smiled at each other, and in that moment it was the old comradeship of years gone by. The fleeting thought came to Red that, if they were to die, this was a good time for it. But they were not ready to die—not yet. They moved in concert, moved with that famous speed which had been so decisive in more than one close fray. Flinging themselves forward in headlong dives, straight for the legs of Tony and the chief, Red striking for the latter.

Both outlaws tried to stop them, but both bullets were a trifle slow and high. An instant later, hitting like a battering ram, arms closing around the outlaw's ankles, Red swept him off his feet. Twisting, he came to his own knees then, the bandit's gun in his hand. Red wasted no time with his captive. That hombre was on his face on the floor, Red's other knee boring into his groin, holding him helpless. And the outlaw's gun was spitting deadly fire.

It was quickly over as the Texans went into action. The only two of the five to survive that first hectic minute were Tony and his chief, prisoners from the start. Black Jack grinned as he came to his feet and pulled the cringing Tony up with him.

"We seem to be as fast as ever, Red," he chuckled. "We've used that trick before, but it still works."

His grin faded as he looked at the ruined mirror. Turning savagely, he ripped the mask from the leader's face, then his grin returned.

"Well, well, if it isn't Lefty the Coyote himself!" he chuckled. "And there's a thousand dollars reward for yore mangy pelt! I told you that whoever busted that mirror, had to pay for it!"

* * *

THE FINAL work of separating the big herd into its original parts had been finished in late afternoon. The weather was perfect again, and by the morrow the herds would be once more on the long trail north, save for the Barrier beef, heading back to home range.

Practically every head had been recovered. It was a dozen miles back to Barrier, however, so it would be necessary to hold them here another night. Red talked with the other trail bosses, as the big job was finally accomplished.

"We'll have to keep a sharp eye out tonight," he warned. "Or the whole thing could be done over again."

"You're a plumb hazard to the rest of us, with yore bunch, Red," one of the others remarked. "But then, we're just as much of a hazard to you, I guess. You figger that them Drove City galoots are still out to make yuh trouble, after t'other night?"

"That was just a truce," Red pointed out. "Black Jack and I enjoyed it—or most of it, while it lasted. But it can't make a bit of difference in the long run."

"Reckon that's life. Well, one thing shore, you don't need to do no worryin' about Bandy and his bunch. He's got them well ahead of all the rest of us, and don't seem partial to our comp'ny. Which is one time where we all think alike."

Red returned to the Barrier herd. They were bedding down quietly now, with more than a mile separating them from any other bunch. Besides the three of them from Barrier, several men from adjacent outfits were aiding them through the night. Dog-tired, Red slipped into his blankets, crawled under the chuck

wagon which had come out from the ranch, and was instantly asleep.

He roused at a touch on his shoulder, took a drink of the tepid coffee waiting in the pot, black as lye and just about as strong, and rode out for his turn at night guard. It was a little past midnight now by the stars, but those stars were fading, with a new storm coming up, and the distant mutter of thunder again breaking the silence. Probably it would be no such storm as the previous one had been, but a thunderstorm always made a herd boogery. And if Black Jack had men out tonight with the notion of tangling the herds again, their opportunity was on the way.

The fact that there had been two stampedes in recent days was no guarantee against others. Stampedes of the big herds along the trail were commonplace. No matter what precautions men might take. Red had unpleasant memories of no less than three stampedes in a single night, on the trail.

HIS COMPANION on watch was circling toward him, singing nasally and sleepily. They passed and kept on. The storm was coming fast now, and the cattle were beginning to lift uneasy heads and bawl, while here and there one came to its feet. If one jumped up suddenly, at a heavy clap of thunder, that could easily spook the whole bunch. Red urged his horse to a trot, swinging in closer, crowding the cattle back together. The rest of the boys would be rolling out now, coming to help. But men and horses could do just so much—

In that moment it happened. Whether it was man-made or the result of accident, the uneasy herd was on its feet and running—heading at a course which would sweep them back into the other bunches from which they had been so laboriously separated.

That looked like something more than accident, though there had been no gun-shots tonight. But there was still a chance to do something about it. Two or three riders were close enough to help, and working together, yelling frenziedly, they bore down on the van of the herd, forcing the leaders to swing. For a few moments, Red held his breath, then let it out in another yell. It was working!

The bunch was being turned, headed now so that it didn't matter if they kept on running. Ahead there was nothing for them to mix with. Their course would bring them back to the Barrier, and with a little rounding up in the morning, that job would be done. There were times when a trick could be made to work both ways.

A slash of rain swept across them, and the leaders tried to veer to the side again. Red drove at them, fighting hard, lashing at noses with his rope, turning them again. The thing was done, and in that moment his horse stumbled, fell sprawling.

It was that, more than anything else, which haunted the dreams of the men on night duty. The continual fear of what might happen in the midst of a stampede if their cayuse fell. And racing at headlong speed in the dark was always hazardous.

Red was flung off, to land heavily. Instinctively he doubled up as he struck, and a moment later he was scrambling desperately to his feet, shaken but not hurt. Already, however, his cayuse had beat him, and was not only back on its feet but running, too far away to catch. And a full half of the maddened herd was behind, sweeping down at him.

In the half-dark, they were a vast shaggy plain which seemed to heave and rumble, and they spread too wide to escape. Luck had been with him to the extent that, for a moment, there had been a bit of open ground, otherwise he would never have regained his feet. But a wide segment of the herd had swept to one side, and they were closing the gap like a noose jerked shut.

There was no chance to outrun them. The clash of horns was like the pound of hoofs, sharp and ugly. There was just one chance left. Run-

ning with them, Red turned suddenly as a big steer swept alongside, jumped and clawed to get on its back—and missed!

His fingers slid along its back, unable to grasp a horn or to get a hold. Now the others were coming in a choking press that would pound him down and flow over him in a steady, pulsating wave. Loose hair came off in his fingers, then, as despair gibbered at him, Red's fingers closed—on the tail of the steer.

THE JERK of it almost took him off his feet, a horn prodded his shoulder sharply and jerked away again. But the pull had kept him upright, and he grabbed at the horn of the other dogie, flinging himself up, and came down astride the steer, hanging on.

Wild with sudden new terror, it bawled hoarsely and strove to shake him off, but the press of bodies was so great now that it couldn't do much pitching or bucking. It had to keep running. Red clung grimly, saw the press gradually begin to thin, then, as there was an open space, he jumped.

He landed sprawling, rolling over and over a couple of times. A running steer snorted sharply in his face, veered to the side and managed to miss him. On his feet, Red looked around. The brief rain was over, clear sky was appearing overhead again, and the herd wouldn't stop now until they were safe back on Barrier. But he still had a long tramp on home.

Dawn was in the air when he reached the buildings. For a mile and more he had seen the beacon light which still burned in Mac's room, proof that the wounded man was still gravely ill, with someone on watch. He tried to move quietly, but as he opened the door of the house, he heard the bedroom door open as well, then Cherry, her face a little white, was beside him.

"Red!" she said. "You're back!"

Red managed a grin.

"Bad penny always returns," he said. "How's Mac?"

"Sleeping—that's why Tara let me watch. The doctor says the crisis will come in a day or so now."

Which meant that he was still gravely ill, that the fight could go either way. Red didn't need to ask questions. The wound wasn't healing as it ought to.

"You look as if you'd been in another fight," Cherry said.

"I got spilled off my horse. Have to take riding lessons, I guess. But the herd's home. Guess I'll catch a couple of winks yet."

He went on to his room, not wanting Cherry to know how desperately weary he was. The thing seemed funny, even to him. He wasn't so old—not quite thirty, yet. But he'd been knocking around this way now for about half a lifetime, and somehow he didn't relish excitement quite the way he used to. After three or four days and nights of it, all pretty steady, he felt the lack of sleep.

WAKING with the sun in his face, he guessed that Cherry must have seen, after all, and have passed the word to let him sleep. It was mid-morning, now. And the sleep had done him a lot of good. He had a sore shoulder, where that horn had prodded, but his clothes had passed it so that the skin wasn't broken. But it was plenty sore.

Cherry too, had slept late, after her vigil, and he was pleasantly surprised when she came to join him at breakfast. She surveyed him critically.

"You don't look the part," she said. "All these things you do—one would never guess it, just to look at you. You—you look almost meek, and pleasant."

"The mildest mannered man that ever scuttled ship or cut a throat, eh?" Red countered. "I'm sorry if I'm a disappointment to you, Cherry."

"You aren't," she denied. "I like you just the way you are. We—we owe a lot to you, here at Barrier, Red—and we won't forget it." Color stained her cheeks. "It's a beautiful day, isn't it?"

"Looks like it," he agreed. "Though I've wasted half of it in sleeping. How is our patient this morning?"

"Which one?"

"Which?" he stared at her. "Is there more than one?"

"I'm almost afraid so," Cherry said gravely. "Mac is half in a coma, and whether he'll ever come out of it, or not—well, I'm praying, but I'm pretty doubtful. So is the doctor, I think, though he comes twice a day and does all he can. Tara is with him, of course—and if Mac dies—I'm afraid it'll kill her too, Red."

Red ate, gravely. Tara loved Mac. There wasn't any doubt of that, and it had gotten to the point where she didn't care who knew it. But she had discovered the truth for herself almost too late, and the thing that she had done, riding to town, which had brought him hot-foot after her and to his present state—that, and the memory which must be doubly humiliating now, how she had promised to marry Black Jack and had been on the virtual point of doing so—the combination, together with her ceaseless watching and anxiety was getting her down.

And this was one thing which he couldn't fight. Only Tara, with her hand on Mac's fevered forehead, her voice which somehow reached to soothe him even in his worst moments, Tara and Doc Granger had to wage this fight. And it was an uneven battle, for the terrible infection of a bullet wound was far more deadly than the hot lead from a gun itself. There was so little that anyone knew about it, even the best of the medicos, so pitifully small an armament with which to fight against the killer.

"If you're going to look at the cattle, I'll go with you," Cherry said. "I—I've got to get out, away from here, get some fresh air. Unless you can get Tara to go, instead."

"I'll try," Red agreed. "Though I'd rther have you, Cherry."

Her eyes fell swiftly, then lifted, steadily, to meet his again.

"That was what I meant, too," she nodded. "But we've nothing to worry us—like Tara has. And she hasn't been out of the house, hardly out of the sick room, for days on end."

TARA tried to smile, as they came in, but her face was haggard. The redness around Mac's wound was an ugly thing now, and told its own story of a losing fight. Red's lips compressed, but he contrived to grin at Tara.

"I'm going for a ride," he said. "And I've come to take you along. Tara. It'll do you good."

"I can't go," Tara said. "Not when he might die while I was away."

"You've got to go," Red insisted. "Doc will be coming out when he thinks the crisis is close. That's when you'll have to make your fight, Tara, to hold Mac back. Cherry can watch, now. But you can't make a fight unless you get some fresh air to clear your head. We'll be back in a couple of hours."

Tara demurred a little longer, then gave in. As she went from the room, Red asked a swift question.

"Where's Jinny? Doesn't she watch?"

"I don't know where she is," Cherry shrugged. "Tara won't let her in here. I—I think she knows that Jinny liked Mac, too—and she's jealous, now. She wants him all for herself. We're a funny set, we humans."

There was too much truth in that bitter knowledge, Red reflected, and it was hard that Cherry should already have acquired it. But there were compensations. Sometimes, if you knew the truth about life, you could meet it with a greater steadiness, a fuller sense of charity for human frailities. Cherry had come to that point. But with Tara, in her hour of need, and with Jinny, feeling outcast and unwanted, it was different.

They rode, almost in silence, Tara looking on the sunshine and the pleasant earth with unseeing eyes. Larks soared high overhead, almost

splitting their throats with the joy of the day, but he knew that she didn't hear them. She was almost certain, in her own mind, of what the final outcome would be. And, remembering how Mac had looked, Red couldn't think of much to say to her.

They swung up across the canyon, saw that the big herd, carefully watched now, was grazing peacefully, quite evidently glad to be home again and with their fill of adventuring for a while.

Black Jack had made a bold play there, and had failed. Men had died because of it, but Red knew that it wouldn't swerve the man from his purpose. Black Jack had changed. Life, and death, had become cheap in his eyes. You played out your hand, and when your time was up, that was that. Till then, you didn't whine, nor did you change any because the other fellow might.

It was a hard code, but he played it straight according to that code, and nothing, not even the love of a woman, would swerve him from it. Friendship had not been able to do it, and friendship had, up to now, been the strongest thing in Black Jack's careless life.

WHAT would he try next? It would not be long in coming, Red reasoned, for this had failed, and the great trail was black with herds which represented so much potential wealth slipping through his fingers. He'd try something, when they were not counting on it. Something to slip under their closely-kept guard.

Someone waved, and Monty galloped to join them. He cast an appreciative glance at sight of Tara taking the air, spoke warmly of what Red had accomplished. They turned back then, the three of them, reached the Trail, now empty save for a single pair of riders. Red eyed them idly, then his glance sharpened with a quick sense that here was trouble again.

By now, Tara and her father had recognized them as well, their faces had paled a little as the two jogged up. Black Jack and Jinny, the former smiling and urbane, Jinny looking half-triumphant, half-defiant.

They halted, and Black Jack doffed his hat in a sweeping bow.

"This is a real pleasure," he said. "We were just coming out to break the news to you. Monty, Tara, Red—allow me to introduce my wife!"

CHAPTER XV

MONTY IRVING seemed to rock back in the saddle, as if from a physical blow. Red watched, somehow not much surprised, but Tara's face was a study.

"Your—your wife?" she echoed, and her voice was flat, scarcely above a whisper. But her eyes, as she lifted them to Jinny, were tragic. "Oh, Jinny—not that!"

"And why not?" Black Jack asked. "A more lovely lady could never be found for a wife, and I had the wit to realize it." His gaze swept Tara, half-mocking, half-pleading. "I was hoping you'd congratulate us."

"Congratulate you? And with Mac dying, from the lead of your hired killers?" Tara blazed. "Black Jack, I once took you for a gentleman! Now I see that you're nothing—nothing but a gunman!"

"I've my own life to live," Jinny said defiantly. "And I intend to live it!"

Black Jack replaced his hat, his smile tightening a little.

It's just the shock, Jinny," he said. "After you've all had time to think it over, I'm sure you'll see that it's all for the best. And why should we fight each other, when we've so much in common? Later on, Jinny and I will ride out to the ranch and talk things over."

Monty still had not spoken, as if fearful of saying too much. Half-mockingly, half-triumphant, Black Jack bowed, and with Jinny riding beside him, a straight, proud little figure, they turned toward Drove City. Tara turned from watching them, her eyes burning.

"She did it to spite me—or so she thinks," she said.

They rode back, almos' in silence.

There was little to say. Red felt sorry for Jinny—sorry, because she was headstrong and unthinking. But he was more concerned for Tara and her father. And it seemed that the Black Jack of Drove City was indeed a stranger, a man he had never really known.

Monty seemed suddenly an older man. He turned to Red.

"You know what sort of a man he is," he said. "What can I do?"

"I don't know," Red confessed. "He'll treat her well—Jack's always a gentleman with ladies, though he(s never been a ladies' man. If they weren't married—but it seems they are—"

"I didn't even suspect anything like that," Monty groaned. "She, why—Jinny's only a baby!"

"She's eighteen," Tara said quietly. "And a woman. And headstrong, Dad."

"You don't mean to say that you approve?"

"I'd like to kill him," Tara said vindictively.

Cherry came running to meet them, her eyes shining.

"Mac's better," she said breathlessly. "He's conscious, and rational. He wants to see you, Tara!"

MAC WAS definitely better. He had passed the crisis, fooling even Doc, and Red knew that it had been Tara who had pulled him through the worst of it.

In the new lift which that gave them, even Jinny's marriage did not seem quite so terrible. It was mid-afternoon when she arrived with Black Jack, in a shiny new buggy, pulled by a pair of high-stepping horses. Black Jack handed her down gallantly, and they came inside. He was urbane as ever, but Jinny looked half-frightened, half-defiant.

"I expect that I owe you an apology, Monty," Black Jack said genially. "But I was afraid that you'd raise objections, and when there's something worth while, it has always been my policy to make sure of getting it first, and explain afterward. I hope you aren't going to be too hard on us."

"I suppose it's too late for that," Monty said heavily. "I guess it's up to you to do the talking, now."

"I appreciate your attitude," Black Jack smiled. "After all, we ought to be friends, and work together."

Tara came in the room, looking at Jinny. Cherry spoke up.

"Mac's better," she said.

"Is he?" Jinny's voice was soft. "I'm awfully glad—for you, Tara."

Silence fell again. Black Jack broke it.

"Aren't you going to congratulate me, Red? I thought you'd be the first to do it."

"Should I?" Red asked. "I've been wondering, Jack."

"Same old Red, aren't you? But seriously, it seems to me that we should all work together now, for our mutual benefit. You saw how quick some of the cattlemen were, to knife you in the back, Monty, if they got half a chance."

"Bandy could hardly be called a cattleman," Monty said shortly. "And I'm afraid that it wasn't his idea to begin with. No, if you're still talking that same scheme, I still say that it's a hold-up, and I'll have nothing to do with it."

Black Jack shrugged, stood up.

"It's a pity that we can't see eye to eye," he said. "I'm afraid there are others beside Bandy who haven't sprouted wings yet. Jinny and I will have to be getting back to town. There's always a lot that requires looking after, in such a town."

He drew on his gloves, bowed, and offered his arm to Jinny. She looked at Tara, made as if to speak, then closed her lips and walked out with Black Jack, who handed her into the buggy and drove away. The thing seemed fantastic, unreal, but it was grim enough. This, Red had a feeling, was just another act, setting the stage for something bigger.

IT CAME the next day, with a new arrival, Judge Kavee. Judge only by courtesy, he was a big, ponderous man, a shrewd enough lawyer, perfectly at home in the atmosphere of Drove City. It was said that he was a fluent speaker only when under

the influence of alcohol, but that was a chronic condition.

Now he remarked heartily on the weather. Monty surveyed him with distaste.

"The weather's fine," he agreed, but you didn't come out here to discuss it, Judge."

"No, I didn't." Kavee sank ponderously into a chair. "As a matter of fact, I came out here in the interests of my clients—Mr. and Mrs. Jack Driscoll. Or should I say your daughter and son-in-law?"

Monty's brows twitched together.

"You're the first to refer to him as such," he said drily. "But I suppose you're right. Go on."

"Thank you. Uh—it is their hope that this matter can be settled amicably. They are more than eager that it should be done so. However, the kernel of the matter is this. Your daughter, now Mrs Jack Driscoll, is the legal owner of one-fourth of Barrier Ranch. As I understand it, this property was left to her by her mother, and according to the description of the land, I find that it runs roughly east and west, a long strip midway of the Barrier—taking in a good part of what is known as the Canyon, and carving, as it were, a slice out of the Barrier, as you might carve a slice from a melon. Correct me if my figures are in error."

Red looked up sharply. He had been about to ride away when Monty had seen the lawyer approaching, and had remained for the visit. Now he was beginning to grasp the implications of the thing—and the real reason why Black Jack had married Jinny.

"Your figures are accurate enough," Monty conceded.

"Thank you. As I understand it, your wife was a wealthy woman, who helped in the purchase of Barrier Ranch originally. It was her wish that it should remain one ranch, under your control, but I am informed that you and she entered into an agreement whereby one-quarter was placed in the name of each of your daughters, to be administered by you, but to become legally their own when they should marry, or become of age further disposition to be decided then. Since Mrs Driscoll is now of legal age *and* married, that naturally comes into force as regards her inheritance."

"So that damned blackguard got wind of it, and married Jinny to get hold of it, did he?" Monty said tightly. "I knew he was a scoundrel, but I didn't think he was that low."

Judge Kavee waved a fat hand deprecatingly.

"Please, let us not indulge in personalities," he said. "I merely represent my clients. As I say, it is their wish that the Barrier may be kept in one piece, and operated the same as ever. However, should you refuse to work with them, I am instructed to say that Mr Driscoll, as husband of your daughter, intends to take over and operate her slice of the ranch."

The thing was clear enough now. Poking through dusty court-house records, Black Jack had unearthed this clause, had studied it out, and now had acted to take advantage of it. It would not alone cut the Barrier in two and nearly ruin it, but it would give him control of the gateway across the Trail—able to charge toll and to do as he had planned from the beginning. Monty was on his feet, his face purpling.

"You can go back to Black Jack and tell him that the answer is No," he shouted. "And since he's done this thing by deceit and the lowest kind of trickery, he'll get no single foot of Barrier, ever! If he dares to so much as set foot on it—any of it—then, whether he's ten times Jinny's husband or not, I'll shoot him like the dog he is! Now get out, damn you!"

CHAPTER XVI

"JUDGE KAVEE?" JINNY hesitated as she opened the door, then, though she had never liked the Judge, forced a smile to her lips. "Won't you come in? My—my husband isn't here, just now. Did you wish to see him?"

"Thank you, Mrs Driscoll, I will stop for a moment, if you don't mind. A nice place you have here—remarkably fine. But then, of course, your husband is a remarkable man."

Jinny colored with pleasure. She was proud of this apartment, in the Drover's Hotel. It was by far the nicest thing she had ever seen, or suspected to exist in Drove City. There were four big rooms, all luxuriously furnished. Everything had been freighted in from end of steel, without regard to cost.

If Jinny had guessed that these preparations had been made for Tara and not for herself, she said nothing. And now, at any rate, as Black Jack had gallantly assured her the day before, it was hers, all hers.

"I'm glad you like it, Judge," Jinny agreed. "What was it that you wanted to see Jack about?"

"Just the little matter of your inheritance, Mrs Driscoll," Kavee explained. "I was just out to see your father, as Black Jack commissioned me to do."

A more astute man than the Judge might have been warned by the sudden indrawn breath, the whiteness of Jinny's cheeks. But he was busy admiring the pictures on the walls, and observed nothing.

"Oh yes, I see. And what—what did my father say?"

"I'm afraid my news isn't as good as I could wish," Kavee confessed regretfully. "I told him that, since one quarter of the Barrier was your land, by the terms of your mother's will, and to become your own when you either married or became of age, that you folks naturally wished to have control of it now. But that your husband had expressed the wish to keep it intact, for you all to work together. I tried to make that quite plain."

"Yes, yes," Jinny agreed. "Go on."

"Well—" Kavee shook his head. "I fear, Mrs Driscoll, that your—shall we say, rather unexpected marriage, was something of a shock to your father? At any rate, he—he refused."

Jinny's cheeks were dead white now, but the Judge felt that he could understand that.

"You had better tell me just what was said," she suggested.

"Perhaps I had. The situation is unfortunate—but you will do better to know. Your father refused to have the Barrier split up, or to give you folks any say in the running of it. He said that if Black Jack set foot on it, he'd shoot him."

Kavee stopped, a little uneasily.

"I'll explain to your husband, of course," he said. "I merely wanted you to know—the news isn't good, but we wouldn't want it to be worse, of course. A little time for cooling off. . .Perhaps I'd better be going."

"Yes, perhaps you'd better," Jinny agreed, and, when the door had closed behind him, she sank into one of the big, luxurious chairs, and stared straight ahead, unseeingly.

THE APARTMENT was on the second floor. Kavee had only reached the foot of the stairs when he encountered Black Jack, who gave him a quick, suspicious look.

"Back, are you, Judge?" he queried curtly.

"Yes, I'm back," Kavee agreed. "I was just looking for you. Nice place you've got here—nice place, nice wife."

"You haven't been telling her anything, have you?" Black Jack demanded sharply.

"Why—why yes," Kavee stammered. "Why not? She asked me to—and you're both my joint clients. And I felt that she deserved—"

With a muttered imprecation, Black Jack pulled him back, into a side room, and closed the door. He was breathing heavily.

"Just what did they say?" he demanded. "Out with it!"

"Well, I—I tried to explain things as carefully as I could—"

"Damn your explanations! What did Monty say?"

"He said he'd kill you if you ever set foot on the Barrier again, even if you were his daughter's husband!"

"That's about what I expected him to say. And you blabbed the whole thing to my wife, did you?" Reading his answer in the Judge's uneasy glance, his mouth tightened to a thin, cruel line. "Damn you, Kavee, I thought you had a little sense in that fat head of yours. I'd ought to kill you for a blundering fool—but the mischief's done. Get out!"

For a long moment after he had gone, Black Jack stood, his face black. Then, shrugging, he composed it, resettled a displaced cuff, and tramped up the stairs. It had long been his philosophy that, if you had to take a licking, the sooner it was over with, the better.

He knocked, following his custom for the last two days, entered the room. Sight of Jinny, staring so fixedly at space, seemed to constrict his throat for a moment. He stopped, raised a hand to his collar, took a step forward.

"Jinny!" he said.

With a swirl of petticoats she was on her feet, facing him, her cheeks flaming.

"So that's why you married me?" she blazed. "To get control of my strip of land—to put over your infamous scheme on the Barrier! I didn't think about that—fool that I was! I believed your protestations when you said that if we were married, that would insure peace instead of trouble! And I—I half thought that you liked me—though I knew all along, when I stopped to think that it was Tara—"

"Jinny!" Black Jack repeated, hoarsely, and held out a hand, pleadingly. "Jinny, let me explain—"

"Explain?" she flared. "After what you've done? After the way you've used me as a tool? Fool that I was! But I didn't think that even you would stoop to such tricks as that—not against your own wife—"

Her hand lashed out suddenly sharply, leaving a red welt on his cheek, which slowly turned white. With her other hand she struck his other cheek, stood watching him, breathing hard, her eyes furious.

Black Jack stood, a little straighter, unmoving, hands at his sides. He did not attempt to speak now, and suddenly Jinny turned, flung herself across the room. There she turned again.

"I hate you!" she cried. "And I hope that Dad, or Red, does kill you! I'm going—get out of my way!"

But Black Jack stepped in front of her, blocking the door. Again and again she struck him, while he remained, immovable, watching her. Then, panting and sobbing, she fell back.

"Oh, let me go," she cried. "Let me out of here. Away from you!"

"If you wish," he agreed. "But where would you go?"

"Anywhere away from you—" she stared at him, her eyes widening. The realization seemed to come to her then she could not go home—not after what she had done. She had her pride, a fierce, untamed thing, and she saw that Jack had seen that.

"You can't find any place to go, around here," he reminded her. "Drove City's no bed of roses! Since you find my presence objectionable, it is I who will go. I promise you that I'll never set foot in here again without your permission, never bother you again, without your invitation. But I do ask that you continue to live here— at least for the present."

Jinny stared at him, slow tears welling from her eyes, a hurt, bewildered look on her face now. She said nothing, made no move. Black Jack half lifted his hand, made as if to say more. Then, closing his mouth grimly, he went outside, closing the door softly behind him, and tramped down the stairs and out into the blinding sunlight.

WHITEY, lounging moodily into the Golden Argus, called for a straight whiskey and, having downed it at a gulp, motioned for a second. The bartender leaned forward, confidentially lowering his voice as he pushed the bottle at him.

"Look over there at that little table," he said hoarsely. "The boss is actin' mighty queer, for a new-married man, if you ask me. Getting drunk as an owl."

"Drunk?" Whitey's head came up with a jerk, though he was careful not to turn or betray his sudden excitement. "You sure? He don't never get drunk."

"I know he don't. But he's sure pourin' it down this time. Mebby you kind of better see what's bitin' him. I think he needs lookin' after."

"I'll take a look," Whitey agreed carelessly. He sipped his own second

drink, his moodiness gone, and sauntered toward the far end of the big room. Without seeming to more than look at Black Jack, he saw that the bartender had not exaggerated. Black Jack, for the first time since Whitey had known him, was drinking straight whiskey, and plenty of it.

"Evenin', Jack." Whitey paused by the table. "Everything all right?"

Black Jack looked up, without seeming to see him. His eyes were bleary. With unsteady hand he poured himself another drink, slopping some of it on the table, and downed it without blinking.

Whitey's glance sharpened. Sliding into a chair at another vacant table, he watched for a while in silence. It soon became clear that for once the boss was getting thoroughly drunk. What might be the reason for this, interested Whitey only mildly. It was the fact itself that held so many possibilities.

For Whitey had a pretty good idea of what had been going on. Black Jack had sent for Red Hamilton to side him, offering him an equal partnership in the whole deal, which Red, surprisingly enough had declined.

Whitey was shrewd enough to see that Red's defection had made a big difference to Black Jack. And now he was getting drunk. In Whitey's mind, it all added up to one thing. Opportunity. Black Jack wouldn't get drunk unless his plans had gone wrong. And it was Red who had caused them to go wrong. Black Jack hated to use the necessary force to get Red out of the way. Yes, it was certainly the wide-open door of opportunity.

By now, Black Jack's head had dropped on to the table, and he was sleeping. He'd probably sleep until sometime the next day. Rising decisively, Whitey motioned to a bartender and swamper to carry him back to his office. Then he proceeded to take charge.

HE HAD been feeling bitter when he entered the saloon. There was big money in the offing, and little of it seemed to be coming his way. Why couldn't Black Jack have offered *him* that partnership? Certainly he wouldn't have turned up his nose at it. But now he'd have it. With Black Jack temporarily out of the way, he'd do the things that Black Jack wanted done, but hesitated to do. And coolly cut himself in for that partnership.

There was much to be done, and it had to be planned. Whitey corrugated his brow, then sent for Judge Kavee.

"Black Jack and me are workin' together, as partners from now on out," he said. "So when I say something, that's orders. Now listen, and don't bungle this."

"I won't bungle," Kavee promised uneasily. "Honest, Whitey, how was I to know that Black Jack didn't want me to report to his wife? He told me I was actin' for the two of them."

Whitey was surprised, but he did not show it. He asked a few questions, and soon had the story. Being quicker-witted than the judge, he had little enough trouble in piecing it together and arriving at the truth.

He had been as surprised as anyone at the boss's marriage to Jinny, for he had supposed that it was Tara whom Black Jack liked. Now he could understand the trick, and Jinny's reaction. Out of that had come Black Jack's present black despondency. But for his purposes it could not be better.

"Listen, Judge," he said swiftly. "That changes things a little. You still go out to the ranch, like I said, and still find Red Hamilton. But don't say anything about Black Jack wantin' to see him. Tell him that Mrs Black Jack sent you—that she wants to see Red, and see him quick. If I know anything about him, he'll come. You can say that Black Jack promises him safe conduct, but don't say anything more than that."

"And I'm to bring him back with me?"

"That's the idea. Now get going."

KAVEE, going out for a second time to Barrier, had delivered his message. But with that done, he could not resist embellishing it a lit-

tle. After all, he was Judge Kavee, the legal light of Drove City, and as such, his judgment on such matters should be above that of the common herd.

"As a matter of fact, Mr Hamilton," he said, and lowered his voice confidentially. "I think there is the question of some slight, er—family disagreement, if you understand me. Perhaps, as a friend of Black Jack's, you can be of some slight assistance —" he coughed.

Red nodded. He wasn't surprised, for it had seemed incredible to him that Jinny should have agreed to any such conditions as Kavee had outlined before. Black Jack had simply taken advantage of her trust, and fireworks had followed. None of it was to his liking, but it was a request which he couldn't refuse.

"I'll be along a little later," he agreed. "You can tell Jinny so."

His chief reason for delaying was that he had no desire to make the trip back into town in company with the Judge. He didn't like Kavee, and didn't want to see any more of him than he had to. The fact that Doc Granger had just arrived gave him a good excuse for waiting. Presently, Granger came out of the house, beaming and rubbing his hands.

"It's rather in the nature of a miracle," he confessed. "But thank God for such miracles as Tara! Mac is on the road to recovery, no thanks to what I was able to do."

"I'll ride into town with you, Doc," Red said.

"Glad to have you—er?" Doc shot a sharp glance at him. "That goes, of course. But is it wise?"

"Black Jack and his wife want to talk to me. Kavee brought word. Jack promises me safe conduct."

"In that case, I guess it's all right," Doc grunted. "You're a friend of his, and, to give the devil his due, I guess his word is good. Though what I'd like to give him—" he shrugged. "Let's talk about the weather."

Dusk was falling as they rode into town. The end of the day for the country round about, it was only the beginning for Drove City. Several big drives were along the trail now, in the vicinity, and a lot of cowboys were heading for town and a big evening. It would be the same as on many another evening. During its course, if events ran true to form, one or two men would get shot. It was even money whether that would mean more work for Doc Granger, or for the caretakers at Boothill.

"It's a sink-hole of iniquity," Doc said, with a jerk of his thumb. "I've been in some wild towns, in my day, but this is the worst. It's long overdue for a clean-up—but where's the broom coming from?"

The same thought was troubling Red. He had come down here, expecting to have a hand in cleaning the town. But it was Black Jack's town. He nodded to the doctor, turned in the direction of the Drover's Hotel, and tied his horse to a well-chewed hitching rail across the street from it.

Several other cow-ponies were clustered about now, fighting off mosquitoes who had come as an aftermath to the rain. He pinched one which had lodged itself behind the ear of the horse standing next to his, and it made a small pop, overstuffed as it was with blood. Red's disgust quickened. It was too much like Black Jack had become—a leech, stuffing itself on innocent blood.

HE TURNED quickly to cross the street to the hotel, and halted at a voice from the shadows just behind him.

"Don't try touchin' your guns, Red! I ain't anxious to kill you, here close to the hotel. They're tryin' tuh build up a high-class reputation for it. But if it comes to trouble, we won't think too much about that!"

Red turned slowly, careful to keep his hands away from his guns, watching warily. The man who stood there, gun centering on him, was no stranger. Red had seen him with Whitey on two or three occasions. He was a tall man, heavy-faced, like a bulldog, and his sparse, sandy hair above light blue eyes gave him an odd appearance. Stepping forward now, he helped himself to Red's guns,

searched him expertly for an extra weapon, and pocketed that as well.

"Yuh might as well climb on yore hawss," he suggested. "Since we're ridin' out of town."

"How come?" Red challenged. "Aren't you going a little far? I came in to see Black Jack."

"I know all about that, Red. Only it happens that Black Jack ain't in no shape to see nobody now—he's dead drunk. And in case you don't know it, me and Diamond and Whitey made a team. You sort of spoiled that when yuh killed Diamond. Whitey and me have been tryin' to correct accounts since then, and Whitey's give me the job of doing it, tuhnight." He flashed big teeth at Red in what was meant for a smile. "And, feller, it's going to be a pleasure!"

CHAPTER XVII

RED WATCHED, warily. He had no doubt that this was the truth, for whatever else he might do, Black Jack wouldn't stoop to such a trick. Which made it all the more dangerous. He had been lured into a trap, and only the fact that he had ridden with Doc Granger had saved him this long.

This man was coldly efficient, a man who not only hired his guns but enjoyed using them.

"Do I call you Tom, Dick, or Harry?" Red asked. "Or don't you come when called?"

"Depends. Mostly I'm known as Notches. Got seven of 'em on my gun. I'll have to file another, come mornin'. Put yore hands behind your back and hold 'em steady."

With gun-muzzle prodding his spine, Red obeyed. A short length of rope, already fashioned into a noose, was slipped over his wrists and jerked tight. That required only one hand. Notches worked swiftly, making sure that the knot was well tied. Then he untied Red's cayuse and ordered him to mount. Somewhat clumsily, Red managed it, and, with the reins tied to the saddle-horn, his captor herded him out of town by the darkest streets.

Outside of town, Notches tossed a lariat loop over Red's head, adjusted it to fit loosely, and tied the other end of the rope to his own saddle-horn.

"I ain't takin' any chances," he explained matter-of-factly. "We're headin' for a spot I got in mind. Squatter come in there a few years ago. Started to dig him a well. Got a hole mebby forty feet deep, but he didn't find no water. Only a rock caved down on him. The hole's still there. I've put two others in there, in the last six months, and they ain't been found yet!"

With this grim assurance, he mounted his own horse again.

"This leaves me with both hands free. Some risk for you, but none for me. I don't aim for you to get away or give me any disagreeable surprises. The reason I keep addin' notches to my gun, is that I don't take unnecessary risks."

Riding alongside, he lifted the tied-together reins of Red's horse, slipped them over Red's head and down behind his back.

"You can use yore hands to sort of steer now, and head like I say. Or if you can't, it's just too bad!"

Tensely, Red managed to grip the reins, to exert a slight guiding influence. It wasn't easy. If something happened to startle his horse, like a rabbit jumping from behind a clump of grass, and it tried to bolt, that noose would break it at about the second jump. He had been a prisoner on various occasions before, but never in the hands of so callous a killer as Notches.

They rode in silence for a while, both horses going at a walk, since Notches seemed in no great hurry, and Red certainly wasn't. There was no moon. The breeze bore an earthy fragrance, as though the night had set loose new senses. It was a night to live in, not to die in—but death was no respecter of time or place.

"Funny, ain't it?" Notches mused, from where he rode behind. "I filed a notch this mornin', and I figgered then it'd likely be my last for quite some time. Couple hombres drifted into town last night. Whitey and me, was settin' in a little game of stud,

along with them. One of them got that suspicious of me that he aimed to argue about it. Just a young feller, too. Mebby he didn't know no better. His partner did, though. He lit a shuck out of town without no arguin' about it. Chances are, he'll live to a ripe old age."

This account of perfidy seemed to amuse Notches. He went on talking.

"Just goes to show how mistook one can be. I'll add another notch for you, come morning. And there'll be plenty more in the next few days, or I miss my guess. Whitey, he's takin' over where he figures Black Jack got cold feet, all on account of going and getting hisself a wife. Such business don't mix, and Black Jack ought to've knowed it. But after he finds how Whitey's took over the Barrier and aims to cut himself into that partnership you wouldn't take, why, is Jack going to take that layin' down? You know the answer."

RED FIGURED that he did, but he said nothing. Unabashed, Notches talked on.

"Sure he won't. Course, Whitey's doing the job he wants done, but that won't make no difference. By this time tomorrow, chances are I'll have a notch for Black Jack same as for you. That's where I got a big advantage over you. I don't have no principles to trouble me. You let yoreself be influenced that way, and what does it get you? A hole in the ground. And you hold back on account of Black Jack bein' yore friend, and what does that get him? The same thing. Nope, the only way to win is play it safe, like I do. That way, you can't lose."

The belated moon was finally rising, a little bigger than it had been before. It shed a mild light, and against it, outlined against the horizon, Notches was targeted. With his last boast upon his lips, he jerked violently as a gun whip-lashed somewhere in the gloom, and the echo whispered away to silence.

Jerking to the death-sting of the bullet, Notches seemed to stand up in the stirrups for a moment. Pain and incredulity washed across his heavy face, then he pitched sidewise, his feet came loose, and he fell sprawling on the ground. Not more than a hundred yards ahead was an old, grassed-over mound of dirt, a yawning black hole beside it. The well!

Red's own horse trembled violently, but heaving back on the reins, Red held it steady, expecting at any moment that the other horse would bolt. But the reins had dropped from Notches' hand to the ground, and it had stopped, though snorting and disturbed. Yet the noose was still around his own throat, still tied to the other saddle-horn! Red waited, but there was only the hoof-beats of a horse, rapidly receding. The killer was escaping, and Red could look for no further help from him.

WHITEY had made his plans swiftly, and as he worked, his ambition had grown. For days he had been plagued by the thought of the partnership which Red had turned down, and how well he would fit into that picture. Beyond that, he had been able to imagine nothing which could be more desirable.

But Red had fallen for his trick, and with Red off the Barrier and out of the way, Whitey figured that the battle was already more than half won.

By the time Black Jack awoke from his sodden sleep, it should all be finished. And if he could do that much, why not go all the way? Why share half with the man who had backed down at the last moment? Besides, Black Jack would probably raise objections. So there was really no reason for bothering with him, after the job was done. Up to then, the crew would probably take orders better if they were issued in Black Jack's name. But then—they'd see who the real boss was!

Like Notches, Whitey had not even guessed that it was more than a social error to fleece those two tenderfeet who had drifted into town the day before, and casually to kill one of them. And Notches was in no position to report back his own findings in the case. Confident that Notches would be handling his end of the job

efficiently, Whitey rode out of town, less than an hour after him, with two score armed men at his heels.

They jogged at a comfortable trot, unhurried, sure of themselves. There was no hurry. These were the men that Black Jack had hired over a period of months, men who wouldn't balk at the job to be done. Taking over the Barrier he had never regarded as being a very big job. He had merely waited for Red's arrival, knowing that the hard job would come afterward, when he declared a toll on every head of cattle passing north along the trail. For that, a redoubtable crew would be essential.

Red's presence at Barrier had made a difference. Whitey realized that. But now they no longer needed to worry about Red, and the crew on Barrier wouldn't be looking for trouble tonight—not until Red had returned from town, having been promised a safe conduct. To circle around and come at the buildings from all directions, during the darkest part of the night, would be simple. And easy. Surprise was what counted.

The thing which Whitey hadn't counted on was the fact that the one tenderfoot who had so hurriedly and discreetly withdrawn, had lingered vengefully near. Having seen Notches riding out of town that evening, he had followed at a distance. He had paid no attention to Notches' companion, for the light was poor. But his shot, when he had finally made it, had counted. Then, fearing retaliation from Notches' companion, he had hurried back to where he had left his horse and beat a hasty retreat.

It was a good piece of work, well done. Or so he was congratulating himself when two score of riders came jogging toward him, when he was passing within a mile of the Barrier buildings. The killer recognized Whitey at their head, and jumped to a swift, panicky conclusion. A moment later he had pulled his gun and was blazing wildly away at them, with an abandon only excelled by their own fussilade which riddled him in turn. For by then, as Whitey angrily realized, all hope of a surprise attack on Barrier was gone. Now it would have to be a grim battle to the death.

CHAPTER XVIII

WHITEY, like the bartender, had made a mistake. Black Jack was pouring it down his throat, but he was not drunk. He had always had a tremendous capacity for liquor, and the ability to hold it without marked effect. Today, such was the seething state of his emotions, it had no more effect on him than water.

His temper was at white-heat. Doubly so, because a good part of it was directed against himself. He had realized, suddenly, and in the moment when Jinny had scorned him and struck him, that she was not only his wife, but that he loved her. He had loved her all along. But somehow he had fallen into the common error of nearly everyone in and around Barrier, and had regarded Jinny as still a child, and therefore unattainable.

That had caused him to make himself believe that it was Tara whom he wanted. Now, too late, he knew the truth. And along with it had come the black realization that, having married Jinny, he had likewise lost her.

The supposition that Black Jack was drowning his sorrows and getting drunk was not Whitey's only mistake. He had badly misjudged the temper of the boss in supposing that this had altered Black Jack's determination in any degree. Black Jack was a stubborn man. Knowing himself in the wrong only intensified his determination to tread the path to the end, whatever that might be. He sat there and drank, allowing himself time to cool off a little, and to plan.

There had been too much delay already. More trail herds than he had ever seen in a like space of time were passing along the trail, and every herd that crossed the Barrier meant that much money slipping through his fingers. As darkness settled, Black Jack rose abruptly.

Beckoning to one of his surprised guards, he issued swift orders to summon every man he had hired.

"Have them at the edge of town, without any fuss, in half an hour," Black Jack commanded. "With horses and guns. Leave a score of men to

keep order in town. I want every other one."

He was there at the appointed time, and his eyes narrowed as he surveyed the group of horsemen. There were seventy odd men there, where there should have been more than a hundred.

"Where's the rest?" he snapped. "Where's Notches? Whitey?"

His answer came, not in words, but in a rolling beat of gun-fire, sounding from toward Barrier—a salvo which died away to sudden silence.

"Reckon Whitey's out there, with the others," someone replied. "He said you give orders for him to take the Barrier tonight. Notches rode off with Red, to get him out of the way, a couple hours back."

Black Jack stared for a moment, his big teeth shutting hard on his cigar. He asked no questions, merely struck in the spurs.

"Come on!" he said.

WHITEY led the charge himself, swearing. A few more minutes, and everything would have been as he had planned it. Now it would take some hard fighting to overwhelm the defenders, and Whitey had little liking for that sort of thing. But it was not all loss. This would be the chance to establish himself as the real boss.

Red lances stabbed in the night, a ring out away from the buildings, then the roar of the rifles sounded, and the eerie whistle of lead, close-driven, some of it finding a mark. Near Whitey, a horse ran riderless. A second volley flashed from the guns of the defenders, and the charge faltered, broke and swept back in confusion.

Yelling hoarsely, Whitey halted them, shouting imprecations. He raved at them. They had to take Barrier now. His real reason was the desire for an accomplished fact. If he controlled Barrier, he would be in a strong position. But if he failed—

Then, having persuaded them to try a second charge, he knew that this wasn't going to do it. The half-light was too good for the defenders, and the screaming bullets were too well placed. His crew might have followed Black Jack, but they wouldn't follow him.

He screamed at them, aware that his voice was rising hysterically, that men were looking at him curiously. And then he saw that they were looking at something else, and his voice dried to a croak in his throat. For that was Black Jack, sitting his horse only a few feet away, looking at him in a silence which held more of contempt than a tirade could have done.

"Have you anything you want to say, before I kill you?" Black Jack asked pleasantly.

Whitey gaped. His mouth fell open, and it required a swallowing effort of will to close it. He knew that he was doomed, knew that to try and claw at his own gun would only hasten the inevitable. Yet he could not fight down his fear, could not keep his hand from trying it. And before his gun had cleared leather, he saw the black muzzle of the gun in Black Jack's hand, saw that sinister eye looking at his own. It seemed to wink redly, but that might have been illusion, for Whitey was already pitching forward in the saddle.

Black Jack holstered his smoking weapon. His voice was easy, almost relieved from strain.

"It don't pay to get too ambitious," he said. "So we won't, right now. A handful of you boys can hold the Barrier crew corraled. Keep 'em so. That's all that's necessary now. The rest of us have bigger work to do. Work that will pay off in dollars. And maybe bullets."

He swung his horse. And now, eagerly, despite that last part of the promise, they followed him.

IT SEEMED as though all the herds of Texas were flowing now along the trail toward the north. Never, in all his memory of it, had Black Jack seen anything to approximate it.

Which was as he wanted it. And having laid his plans well in advance, he was ready now. By morning, there was more than a modicum of excitement among the trail crews, who had heard the desultory firing of the night, on Barrier. But that was only a

forerunner of what was in store for them as they prepared to get the herds moving again.

Black Jack had thrown a barricade of men and horses across the trail. A small but well-equipped army. Where the trail crossed the canyon, it could be held without much trouble by a few good sharpshooters properly posted, and Black Jack had seen to that detail himself. The marksmen were out of sight, but the main army was out where all could see them as the first herd neared the new Barrier.

Ring Kern was rodding the Cactus, and Black Jack had encountered him before. Kern was as thorny as the brand he rode for, and he had a tough bunch behind him. He came spurring ahead at sight of the men who were halting the herd, shoving back his battered hat from long, straight black hair which gave him, along with his deeply tanned face, almost the appearance of an Indian.

"What's the idea?" he demanded.

"There's a new regulation in effect here," Black Jack explained. "Cattle coming along the trail have been causing a lot of trouble lately, and it's too much of a nuisance for all the herds to pass free, the way they've been doing. From now on, they have to pay to cross the Barrier."

Kern's eyes narrowed.

"Sounds reasonable—to a point," he conceded. "But I'll know better about that when I hear the rest of it."

"It'll be a dollar a head, from now on," Black Jack said.

"Only a dollar a head, eh? Why not just send word to everybody in Texas to drive stright to the railroad and sell, and send you the money? Save everybody some trouble, that way."

"If you think the price is high, you don't have to go across Barrier, of course." Black Jack shrugged. "You can head back for the railroad, or back for Texas, for all I care. But if you cross Barrier the price is a dollar a head."

"Nobody'll ever pay it," Kern said flatly. "Me least of all. We'll swing around the Barrier."

"That'll suit us fine, if you like it that way," Black Jack agreed. "Only push 'em back off Barrier if that's the way you see it."

Kern scowled. He had made his bluff, and it hadn't worked. He knew, as well as Black Jack, that going around Barrier was out of the question.

"There's a lot of herds coming along," he said meaningly. "And the boys'll be red hot fighting mad, in every one of them. You'll have a fight on your hands if you try to get away with this."

"Barrier has a right to stop any or all of you from crossing, and to charge for the privilege," Black Jack pointed out. "You'll be outside the law if you start trouble." He carelessly turned back his coat, to display the badges pinned there. "I'd think twice, if I were you, before tryin' it."

"Those pieces of tin don't mean a thing," Kern said flatly. "We're willing to pay a fair price—say a hundred dollars for my bunch here. But not a dollar a head."

"The price is a dollar a head," Black Jack repeated. "When you pay it, you cross. Not before."

"We'll cross, but not at that price," Kern predicted, and swung his horse sharp around. Indignation would mount to the boiling point, of course, and the trail bosses would come to him and demand their rights. Having foreseen the pattern and prepared accordingly, Black Jack wasn't worried.

BACK in town, his glance lifted briefly to the second floor of the Drovers, but the windows looked back at him blankly, and without expression. His own eyes were hooded, like a hawk's, as he returned to the Argus.

He had hoped that Jinny might have reconsidered, might want to talk it over with him. There wasn't anything more to be said, he knew, not unless he changed his own mind and told her so. But the hope had persisted. Now it withered and went out, like a candle flame snuffed at dawn. The triumph of his already half-won victory was like the candle itself, misshapen, and all but rubble.

The next few hours passed quietly. By now, as far as eye could see, there were herds along the trail south of Barrier, bunched close together, held by impatient men whose tempers were

beginning to fray. But north of Barrier the trail was showing empty once more to the horizon.

Scouts had been sent out by the cattlemen, ranging wide to the west, to report on the possibility of swinging around the Barrier. Men who knew the country had said that such delay was useless, but they were in a minority, and they had to wait until the others were convinced. Black Jack was well satisfied.

At mid-afternoon the others were ready for a final parley. At least a dozen outfits were represented. The fact that they were coming to see him was proof enough that they had found any other alternative as hopeless as he had known they would.

They came to meet him, a tense, grim bunch of men. Ring Kern seemed to have been chosen as spokesman.

"You seem to have us," he said. "We're willin' to pay twenty-five cents a head. That's an average of five hundred dollars a herd. It's a hold-up, but it's better than war. But that's our last word."

That meant six thousand dollars if he let them pass now. And others would pay at the same price, of course. But if he could get that, he could get a dollar.

"I've named my price," Black Jack said. "It stands."

"We'll never pay it. And if it comes to fightin', it's you that's outside the law. You don't own the Barrier."

"Happens that my wife owns this strip, and I'm protectin' her rights," Black Jack explained. "You've got no argument there."

AS HE had expected, that news disconcerted them. They had discovered that the real crew of Barrier were under siege, though little had been happening since that first round of firing the evening before. But here he had at least as much law as any of them.

"There ain't no use arguin', in that case," Kern pronounced. "Lik I say, we won't want a fight. But if it comes to a choice between that and being held up, we'll fight—and there's enough of us to blast a way through there. And more coming up the trail right along, who'll be with us. Better be sensible."

"I don't want to fight, either," Black Jack said easily. "But I don't bluff—ever. You boys'll find it a lot cheaper to pay than to die. Some of you ought to have sense enough to see that."

"We're all agreed to stand together, if that's what you mean," Kern warned. "Everybody knows that's our only salvation."

"That so? Maybe some of the others don't feel so strong that way as you do. Payin' a dollar a head is a lot cheaper than dying. When you do that, it lasts a long time."

He waited, and some of the others stirred uneasily, looking toward Black Jack and the two score of mounted men who lounged in their saddles behind him, the sunlight glinting along rifle barrels. There were other men behind those, but out of sight. It would be a bitter battle, there could be no doubt of that. A fight which would inevitably mean death for a good many on both sides.

"Me, I reckon I'll pay." One man rode a little forward now. He was a weasened specimen, with shifty eyes and a furtive face. "I only got a thousand head, and I can pay better than I can afford to lose everything." He thrust a hand into his pocket, brought out a roll of dirty bills, and commenced laboriously to thumb through them.

"That's being sensible," Black Jack approved. "It's a lot the best and cheapest way."

"What if we won't let you, Sheck?" Kern demanded.

"You cain't stop me," Sheck protested. "I got a right tuh choose for myself."

"You sure have, Sheck," Black Jack agreed. "And if there's any trouble, my crew'll back you up in your right to go ahead after you've paid your toll. And I'm speaking as the law now!"

CHAPTER XIX

FOR A moment, Red Hamilton sat rigid, tense. Only his lips moved, as he forced his voice

to quietness and calmed his own cayuse with words. Everything depended now on words, for the frightened pony was trembling violently, and it would take only a little to make it bolt in wild panic. And though the reins were looped over and behind him, were in his fingers, he could exert little enough weight on them to do any good at all, if either horse tried to run.

He had expected that it would be all over with when Whitey's henchman, Notches, had toppled so limply out of the saddle. It took a well-trained pony to stand under such circumstances, even with the reins sweeping the ground. But Notches' cayuse was doing it. Now, if he could get out of the saddle, he would be all right.

But the balance was delicate. Two or three sidling steps of either horse, at the wrong moment, and when that noose about his throat tightened, panic would come to one or both cayuses. It wasn't a matter of chance, but of certainty.

Just as it was impossible for him to raise his hands and get that rope off his head, or to lift the reins which were behind his back. Getting out of the saddle would be easy enough. But he had to slip his body out from under those reins without pulling them while he did so, otherwise his fretful horse would sidestep and then plunge wildly.

Red waited a moment longer, soothing the horse. Then he started to swing off, steeling himself to move unhurriedly. Balancing on one foot in the stirrup, without help from his hands, holding his whole body steady, was the hardest work he had ever been called upon to do.

He felt the reins catch at his belt and pull, and then they came loose and slid a little. But a second time they stuck, and now he knew his cayuse was going to jump. A moment later he was on the ground, tumbling backward in a heap, as the cayuse jumped away. And Notches' pony was shying back from the rolling thing on the ground.

Red forced himself to lie still, not moving. To talk to it from this prone position would only make it worse. For a few dragging seconds he thought it would stop again, but it was still backing, and now it had caught sight of Notches' inert form as well. In another moment, forgetting its training, it would turn and follow the other horse.

THERE was only one thing to do, and Red did it. He twisted about, so that his head was to the horse, and waited. An instant later the roped jerked, and the closing noose caught on his chin, flopped him forward on his face in the dirt, but it had come off, sliding loose, with no worse result. Both horses were running now.

Which meant that he'd have to walk in from here, but at least he was alive. His hands were still tied behind his back, however, and there was no immediate prospect of getting them loose. His guns were on Notches, but he couldn't get hold of them, either.

He walked, and rifles made a distant thunder on the night, grew muted again, but soon broke forth afresh. Their spiteful chatter was like gossip, vicious, designed to hurt, but often promiscuous and hasty.

There was a stone in his left boot, only a small pebble of a thing, but it was like walking on a thorn. He'd have to have it out before he could go much farther, Red realized, and considered the possibilities. There seemed only one. To find a rough, sharp-pointed rock, and to rub his bound hands against it until the rope were through or the knot loosened. It would be a painful experience, and slow, but it might be done.

Luck was with him, along the rimrocks of the canyon, in finding a likely prong of boulder. But it was a couple of hands too high up for convenience, so that he was forced to stand on tip-toes to reach it. That lessened the pain on his already swollen foot, except when, losing his balance, he had to come down

suddenly on it, and then it was as though needles stabbed the swollen, boil-like part of it.

The knot gave a little, and he resumed the struggle. Finally his hands were free, but it was agony to bring his arms around in front of him, cramped and asleep as they were. He removed his boot, took out the stone, and felt a vast relief.

The firing by now was desultory and scattered, which meant that the first attack had been met with a vigorous fire from defenders not to be caught napping. So there would be nothing else for a while, not if he knew Black Jack, and Red had no delusions on that score. Whatever Whitey might have schemed, it would be Black Jack who would run the show. Red slept, and awoke with the sun in his face and hunger under his belt, and silence hanging heavy over the country.

Moving warily, he spotted half a dozen of Black Jack's crew, back at the easy limit of rifle range from the buildings, but posted strategically where they could watch both ways and keep the Barrier crew penned up. Black Jack was getting impatient. He wanted tribute money from every herd that came up from Texas, and so he was playing a double game.

It might be possible to slip in to the ranch by watching his chance and taking plenty of time, but that would put him where he would be more cramped in his movements, and to no good purpose. Red circled back, keeping out of sight, headed down the trail. He walked into one of the circles about a chuck wagon and introduced himself, and found, as he had expected, that the news of the proposed toll hold-up was already known, and indignation running high.

"Ring Kern's talked to Black Jack," his hosts explained. "And Kern's for fightin' our way through and without wastin' any time. But if that's the way it is, I got a better idea. We'll make a feint at that, so's to hold the attention of the main crew. Then we'll strike and rout them hombres that are besiegin' yore crew, and strike at the rest uh them from the rear."

"I think we'll do better to let them watch the ranch for a while," Red suggested. "Takes more men that way than it would any other. My idea would be to wait a few hours and let Black Jack tip his hand. After that we'll know better how to hit at him."

"How do you mean?"

"I figure he's got things planned with at least one of these outfits. Been down the trail in advance and signed up somebody to betray the rest of us when the time was ripe. You wait a while, let me circulate among the other outfits, and see what I can find out."

They agreed readily enough, equipping him with gun and horse. As the day wore on, Red went quietly from one stalled bunch to the next, and as he rode, his satisfaction increased. Here were plenty of fighting crews, when the time came to fight. But there would be a lot greater chance of success if they knew their friends and their enemies before it began.

* * *

BLACK JACK, listening to Sheck, barely restrained a smile of triumph. This break in the solid front of the cattlemen, the precedent of one outfit having paid, would weaken the others, force them to fall in line.

Then his smile thinned. Another horseman had pushed forward among the crowd, and Red Hamilton was not a man to mistake lightly in any crowd. He nodded to Black Jack, held up his hand.

"Boys," he said. "I talked to Sheck, this morning. He figured I was in on this, being from Barrier. He's gettin' paid for this job, 'stead of payin' toll. Let him go, if he wants to—we don't want him or his crew underfoot. But we know what they're like."

Sheck paled as a growl went up. But there was no opposition to them

pushing past the other waiting herds if they felt so inclined. It was Kern who voiced the common thought now.

"Reckon we're ready to go too—but we'll pay our toll with bullets!"

"Seems to be the sensible thing," Red agreed. "Unless you want to back down, Jack. You're trespassin' here on Barrier—and you can't win!"

"As you know, Red, I never back down," Black Jack said pleasantly. "I know you don't, either. So I'll say good-by, for the sake of the old days. One of us—or both—will be Boothill bait before morning.

CHAPTER XX

A BULLET cut through the wall of the kitchen, adjoining the bunk house, smashed a heavy shaving mug to fragments and scattered its remains thunderously among a stack of tin plates beyond. In the house adjoining, Cherry, crouching by a window, stood up with sudden resolution, her knuckles showing white around the stock of the rifle she gripped. She was moving like a shadow toward the door when Tara stood quietly in her way.

"Going somewhere, Cherry?" she asked.

Cherry nodded. Her voice was low, repressed.

"Away from here," she said. "I've—got to, Tara."

"He's probably all right, Cherry. He seems able to take care of himself."

"But he's been gone so long!" Cherry wailed. "And I've got to know!"

"You like him a lot, don't you, Cherry?" Tara asked softly.

Cherry nodded, making no effort at dissimulation. Her eyes were tragic.

"If Black Jack's had him killed, I'll kill him!" she said.

"Wait a minute," Tara added. 'I'll go with you."

"But you mustn't," Cherry protested. "There's Mac—"

"He's doing all right now. We've always ridden together—we used to be three. We can at least be two now."

Cherry blinked, but waited in silence. Presently Tara was back, clad like her sister in chaps and cowboy hat, gripping her own rifle. They stole softly to the barn, taking advantage of the heavier darkness which preceded the dawn. Then they rode, following a line of trees and brush, but leaving it before reaching the man on guard where the cover ended.

They were through their own lines, and none the wiser. But getting past the ring of besiegers would not be so easy. Dawn was in the air now, and a pale rose in the eastern sky bloomed to sudden fiery red. As though this had been a signal, a rifle stuttered from the ghostly depths of a defile, and Cherry heard the whistle of the lead.

She put her horse to a gallop, and saw that Tara was shooting back where the gun-flash had come from. They reached cover, but it was only momentary, and now the alarm was out. They were in a no man's land, and they could retreat or risk worse things by going ahead.

By waiting for full daylight, so that the besiegers could recognize them, there would be little risk of being shot. But they would be taken prisoners, and that had no appeal. This was their fight, as much as any man's. Barrier was theirs. More important, their men were endangered.

"We'd better s e p a r a t e," said Cherry.

"And ride like blazes," Tara added. "Spur, Cherry!"

The day was upon them like a pouncing cat, with frightened shadows scurrying for the holes. They thundered on now, separating, and all at once guns were pounding in startled crescendo. Cherry lifted her own rifle, trying to aim, but the better light gave back no such betraying stabs of gunflame as the dark had done. Then there was a target in front of her where a horseman raced, his own gun belching flame. She was just squeezing trigger when

the world rocked to a heavy shock which sent her horse reeling, and she knew that it had been hit, was going down in a crashing plunge.

IT WAS instinct and a life-long training which caused her to kick her feet loose from stirrups, to land doubled up and rolling as she hit. Even so, earth and sky were reeling wildly, she was scratched and bruised, and then, as she still clutched grimly at her rifle and tried to sit up, she saw the gunman, still riding at her, trying for a better aim. Saw the gun buckle wildly in his hands while he seemed to fold in the middle, to pitch and jerk, spilling from the saddle.

"Tara!" she breathed, and ran and caught the flying reins before the terrified horse could escape, swung to the saddle and spurred ahead again.

But it was not Tara. They were through the gap in the lines now, dropping quickly into a branch which edged off from the canyon, out of sight. There was Tara, and, riding to join her, the first of the sunlight like a ripple of steel along her rifle barrel, a trickle of smoke still spilling from its muzzle, was Jinny.

For a quarter of a mile the three of them rode in silence, but there was no pursuit, and they pulled up.

"Thanks, Jinny," said Cherry.

"I think I killed him," said Jinny, and her eyes were wide and shocked. "I—I meant to."

"You didn't," Tara comforted. "He got up and ran, after a minute. I saw him."

"At least, you saved me," Cherry said. "Have you seen anything of Red?"

Jinny shook her head. For a moment they sat there, then Jinny lifted her head and smiled, tossing back a loose ringlet or so.

"We're riding together again," she said. "And there's work enough to do, from the looks."

"It's nice to have you, Jinny," Tara said. "Only—I'm sorry."

"I was a fool," Jinny said shortly. "A blind, selfish, arrogant little fool—and I hate him!"

Both sisters looked at her searchingly. Cherry's voice was suddenly tender.

"I'm sorry, Kid," she said. "I didn't know that it was that way. That you loved him."

"It's too late," said Jinny. "Too late for everything! What are we waiting for?"

But even with a fierce impatience, there was little enough that could be done. They were outside the lines of the beseigers, but there was nowhere to go. All firing had ceased, settled into a watchful waiting from both sides. Keeping hidden, watching, the sisters saw what it was all about, though Jinny had known already. The cordon of gunmen had been placed across the trail, and now a far bigger battle than that between Barrier and town was in prospect.

"There he is!" said Cherry suddenly, and her voice was warm again.

Her sisters had not seen him, but presently they made Red out, far off, engaged in conversation with several of the cattlemen. Presently they rode off together.

"I told you he'd be all right," Tara said.

"If we'd only thought to bring something to eat," Cherry sighed. "It's going to be a long day, I'm afraid."

THERE was nothing to do but wait. They could have sought out Red, but Cherry knew that he would feel handicapped, with a sense of responsibility, if she were there, and she was quite capable of looking after herself, of playing this game in her own way. The three of them, hidden off here, unsuspected, could be a powerful factor if need arose.

And Jinny wouldn't want to go over, openly, to the other side. For that side was fighting Black Jack now. It was her battle, but the three of them would play it out, as they had done things together since girlhood. Only this was something where neither Tara nor Cherry could do things for their little sister. Here

was the open door of a childhood's dreamland, but what lay beyond the door?

The sudden sharp clash of gun-fire aroused them. Tara sprang up from where she had been lying, outstretched in the grass, asleep in the sun. Cherry had been half-asleep as well. Only Jinny had been on watch, and her face was still, washed of all expression, as she turned. The sun was past mid-afternoon.

"It's come," Jinny said. "The cattlemen on one side, Drove City on the other."

They caught their horses. Someone had set off the spark when neither side was quite ready for it. A few huddled forms lay here and there, a few horses ran riderless. Then both groups came spurring, each intent on routing the other.

Cherry opened her mouth, but closed it again. She levered a shell in, and fired. The range was a little long, and this time the scream burst from her throat. Red's horse was down, Red was struggling to get to his feet, and another horseman was riding at him, grimly intent on finishing him. A rifle spoke almost beside her, and the rider jerked as had that other man in the dawn, and Red was running to swing up behind another man who spurred to his aid.

"Thanks, Jinny," Cherry said huskily. "That makes twice, today."

"I'm not doing so badly, am I?" Jinny asked, almost gaily, then flung down her rifle, stricken. A moment later she had turned and was riding blindly away from them. Tara made as if to follow her, but Cherry stopped her, pointing.

Another man had been targeted for a moment in Jinny's sights before she had recognized him. In the frenzied excitement of the moment, she had been ready to shoot again, at any and all comers. And then she had recognized Black Jack.

CHAPTER XXI

FOR A moment, following Black Jack's good-by, Red sat his horse, surprised at the absence of feeling in him. Even a few days before, such a word from Black Jack would have troubled him a lot. They had once been friends.

But that was it. Once they had been friends. It belonged to the past. Red had stood, once, on the crest of the Rockies. It had been very high up, yet it was no pointed, jagged peak which marked the crest. Rather an almost flat, partially wooded tableland, half a mile across. In that, there had been a fair-sized creek, springing to life from under a giant boulder. Red had followed it, had caught fish from it.

And then, abruptly, the creek had split in two. The land still looked almost flat, but part of the water had turned, was soon plunging toward the Pacific. The other half of the little creek was heading for the Atlantic.

That was the way with their friendship. It had reached a turning point, and this was the end. What Black Jack said was probably prophetic. One of them, perhaps both, would be Boothill bait before morning.

It was that moment which Sheck picked to try and earn his money. He had been promised an extra thousand head of cattle to drive north if he could do something like this, at such a moment, taking advantage of an opportunity which would come to him rather than to the others, because he was still with the cattlemen. To strike and throw them into confusion. Now, while other men watched Red and Black Jack, he drew his gun and pumped two swift bullets into the back of Ring Kern, seated a dozen feet ahead of him.

Kern died to the shock of the bullets, and Sheck died a moment later, bullet-riddled, having miscalculated his moment rather badly. But while he would never receive traitor's pay for what he had done, he had earned it rather well. Here was what Black Jack had been waiting for, sudden confusion and battle. Already, Black Jack's crew were driving forward, guns blazing, and it was that blaring

fusillade which had brought Tara so suddenly awake.

Startled, lips twisting at the thought that here was obituary to the memory of his friendship, Red raised his voice, rallying the cattlemen. He emptied his own revolver, and then, with both sides a little shocked at the savage ferocity of that moment, while neither of them had broken nor given ground, they drew a little apart, the firing died down.

A wounded horse was on the ground, screaming, the sound far more dreadful since a horse so seldom gave voice to pain. Red raised his rifle and ended its misery, and like an echo to the gun-clap, his own horse went down, flinging him in a heap, dazed and jarred. A second time guns were blaring, and Red, with the world spinning, got unsteadily to his feet, saw a horseman riding at him, leveling his gun. He had lost his own guns in the tumble, was unarmed. He tried to steady himself, as if to withstand the shock of the bullet, saw the other man jackknife in dreadful surprise, then one of the cattlemen swept up and gave him a hand, up behind him.

For another five minutes the fighting was vicious. Outraged and aroused, the cattlemen forced Black Jack's crew to give, but they retreated sullenly, without breaking. Again, as by common consent, the firing stopped

This, Red saw, appalled, would never do. The losses had been heavy on both sides, and completely indecisive. Now, sensing the same thing, and a good general in any case, Black Jack was withdrawing his men in good order, to the protection of the canyon.

THE CATTLEMEN could fight their way through, or pay toll. Either course would be costly. As an added gesture of his complete confidence in the ultimate outcome, Black Jack was withdrawing his men who had been laying siege to Barrier itself. If he won this battle, that would be won along with it, automatically. And if he lost this, there was no profit in the other.

The odds favored him. The canyon, here a little west of Drove City, and not far from the eastern border of Barrier, was not so formidable a thing as it was farther west. It broadened, became more shallow, and the trail through it was an easy one. Yet it had plenty of good points for men to lie hidden, so that a handful could defend it against an army. Which was what Black Jack proposed to do.

Time was on his side. The cattlemen couldn't wait here very long, with more herds coming up the trail. There would be no grass, nor even any water, if they were held back. The added weight of men would be a disadvantage, for the herds must be watched, or mix in a terrible confusion. Food would run short, and the only near place where it could be bought was Drove City—and Drove City could defend itself.

Drawing back for conference, the cattlemen discussed the matter.

"I'm still for gatherin' every man we've got and blastin' a way through there," one grizzled veteran of the trail pronounced. "It'll cost us something—but I'm damned if I'll pay a cent of tribute to a highwayman. If it'd been Monty Irving, I might have done diff'rent. He had some rights. But if we pay now, we lick him same as ourselves. So I say fight!"

That was the consensus of opinion. Some favored waiting for dark, as giving them a better chance. Others were all for making an overwhelming charge of it then and there.

"If we do that, we'll lose a lot of men," Red reminded. "And some of your outfits will be too crippled to ever get your herds on north. But in the dark, they can see us while they keep hidden, and it'll be just as bad."

"You got somethin' better to propose?" one asked, a little acidly.

"Yes. There's thirty thousand head of cattle along the trail here. It'll be a lot cheaper job to cut them out afterward, than to be killed off ourselves. Let them come together in one big bunch. Then we'll push them through fast. And go with them. There's nothing on earth can stop a herd like that, once they get going."

The others looked at him, a little awed, but there were no dissenting voices. The very magnitude of the thing almost staggered the imagination. No such vast herd had been seen on these plains since the buffalo had been crowded from them.

Yet it was perfectly feasible. And it was the one thing which Black Jack had dreaded. Because of that, he had tried every other possible trick to win. Stampede had been his own weapon on several occasions. Now, on a magnitude which dwarfed all that had gone before, it was to be turned against him.

Black Jack saw that, as the preparations were swiftly made, and he made his own as well. The herds back along the trail were coming up now, joining in one vast milling bunch. They would surge forward at just about sunset, and this would be sunset for the hopes of one side or the other. If they once got across, that would be it. But if they could be held, or turned—then the cattlemen would be forced to acknowledge defeat and meet his terms. It would take days to gather them again, and they could never afford a second try.

"He'll try and stop them," Red warned. "So we'll stampede 'em. Keep the flankers out, to head them straight. But keep back, till they get to rolling. Once they're well started across, we'll go along under cover of dust. I don't think we'll have much trouble, after we get them moving. But that's got to be done fast! When I give the signal, everybody move together!"

THE HERD still spread for miles, milling and uneasy. Dust from their constantly churning hoofs rose like fog above them, the uneasy bawling from tens of thousands of throats was like a heavy roll of thunder. Red's arm lifted.

Guns blasted, blankets waved wildly, where men were gathered on the three sides. For a few moments the vast bunch seemed to hesitate, as if gathering itself. The uneasy bawling surged from throats in one vast earth-shaking roar, then the pound of rolling hoofs dwarfed that sound and the whole prairie shook to the impact of it.

The vanguard reached the canyon, and Black Jack made his counterplay. Two tons of dynamite, hastily brought out from Drove City, and long since gathered for just this eventuality, placed along the canyon for a mile, went off in a series of thundering blasts, right in the faces of the leaders. Behind it came surging Black Jack's crew, yelling hoarsely, shooting, all sounds lost and swallowed in the larger roar which held all the prairie now. Desperately, the defenders were trying to turn the stampede, to swing it to the west, back upon Barrier, up canyon, where the canyon itself would be a sufficient barrier to their passing.

Red had foreseen this, and had placed most of his own big crew on the left flank of the herd. For a few moments the confusion was indescribable, but out of that something had to give, and quickly. Hundreds of cattle, caught in the milling, were going down and being trampled, the whole mass tried to pile back upon itself but was being forced inexorably ahead by the pressing tide from behind.

And then the herd turned, swinging—not on across the canyon, which Black Jack had been so grimly determined to prevent; in that he had won. But they were not turning west on Barrier, which Red had been equally determined should not happen. Rather they were spilling eastward—heading in an all-engulfing wave, straight for Black Jack's town of Drove City.

CHAPTER XXII

THIS was hell on the hoof. These were longhorns, the whole herd composed largely of three and four and five-year-olds. Generations of foraging in a half-wild state, fending off attacks from wild animals, existing on a not too opulent range, had made them lean and hard, made up of bone and horn gristle. Tireless, with all the instincts of the wild. Now to that was

added the herd impulse of terror, all transmuted in the one word, stampede.

Men had had a hand in this, up to now. They had pushed the spooky herd into a lumbering run, and the dynamite had maddened them, showering the leaders with the hot blood of their unfortunate fellows. Turned and swinging west, they had been compelled to crash back upon themselves and turn again. But now the whole vast herd was really running, and man had ceased to be an element in what happened. The primordial instinct dominated now.

The roar was constant and terrific, an earth-jarring impact of sound and hooves combined. The wild bawling of individuals, the clashing of horns, all was lost, blended in the greater dispassion.

Black Jack's crew were fleeing now in wild terror, equal to that of the herd. It was every man for himself, in a frantic effort at escape, to get out of the way of the juggernaut of hoofs. Only fleet horses could do this, for the herd covered a vast area, was all-engulfing as it surged ahead. And now, squarely in its patch, stood Drove City.

The warning had come ahead of the herd, but barely in time. Terror equal to that in the minds of the dogies gripped the populace. Most of them were fleeing, while there was yet time. Some, too confused or too greeedy to think straight, preferred to trust themselves to the shelter of the buildings, to try and salvage what they could lay hands on.

Then the vanguard of the herd hit the town. Had there been only one or two good buildings, they might have stood a chance, for the leaders swerved and plunged to either side. But here they were too many buildings, scores of them. For a few minutes the running herd managed to surge past and around them, but as the weight of the mass thickened, that was no longer possible. Forced back and forth around and between the buildings, troubled currents were created, smaller floods which began to spill their turgid streams one against the other, creating a boil like a giant whirlpool, with the town in the center of it.

All at once a shack crumpled and caved in, the press of bodies promptly pushing through the broken walls, until in a space of seconds the whole structure was flattened and splintered almost into kindling wood, and no visible trace of where it had been a moment before.

As though this had been a sort of awaited signal, half a dozen other shacks swayed, crackled and went down together. Now it was happening everywhere. The rocking weight of the massed herd was too great. Pressure on either side cracked flimsy walls, and the bigger, staunch-er buildings merely withstood the weight until, buttressed against their flat surfaces, cattle, unable to turn either to the right or the left, fell, were trampled, and other buildings gave way.

Among those which stood longest were the Drover's Hotel and the Golden Argus Saloon. But nothing so flimsy as the construction of Drove City could outlast what was happening to it now. The whole town was being flattened and ground out of existence. From a couple of miles back, Red watched in amazement. Drove City had been in need of a cleaning. It was getting a more thorough and merciless application of a broom than ever he had contemplated.

Here was the end of Black Jack's dream. The very force that he had unloosed was proving his master now, spreading ruin as it surged along. The dust cloud off there was heavy, shutting out most of the scene, but it was possible to see to some extent at the sides. Red watched. And then, all at once, he was spurring wildly after the herd, knowing that no matter what happened now, he would be too late.

JINNY rode blindly, blinking back the tears, heedless of where her horse headed now. There had been a cold lump in her breast where her heart should have been, an icy thing which would not melt, which had no feeling. The numbness from it ex-

tended to her brain, so that she could barely think. It had been that way ever since she had learned of Black Jack's duplicity, and she had sent him stalking from their rooms, his face still livid from the marks of her hands.

Fiercely she had told herself that she hated him, that she was glad it had happened that way. An echoing cry which rang emptily in the garret of her soul, which brought no comfort.

Finally she had ridden out, had joined her sisters, knowing that she could do no other way. For a little while there had been a small measure of comfort in handling a rifle, in shooting with the intent to kill. She had felt a fierce exultation when she had targeted that last man in her sights, had been about to squeeze the trigger. She had understood, then, some of the things which had horrified and bewildered her before—how the cowboys, ordinarily calm, courteous and gentle-souled underneath a sometimes callous exterior, could do battle, and shoot in the heat of it, or string up rustlers without compunction.

And then she had recognized Black Jack, barely in time. The ice was melted now in a flood of tears which ran unheeded down her cheeks. Everything was wrong and nothing could be made right, and she no longer cared what happened to Barrier, to the cattlemen, and least of all, to herself. There had been sharp tragedy in her life, only a few short years before, over a broken doll. Mac had mended the doll. But who could mend a broken heart?

Not Mac—not her heart. Only Black Jack could do that, and Black Jack must hate her now. What she had done to him, seeking only a vain and selfish revenge against the world for wrongs wholly fancied, had been as terrible and deceitful a thing as what he had done to her.

The sun was declining when she raised her head, looking around, seeing things again for the first time. Something had roused her. What was it? She had ridden for miles, circling gradually, and now she saw that she was a little south and east of the town. Then she heard the sound anew, and recognition of it sent a sharp thrill through her, not of fear, but of an old, nameless apprehension, inherent in the blood of cattlemen. For this was the sound of stampede.

LOOKING about swiftly, she saw it then—the vanguard of the plunging herd, heading for Drove City. In a flash she understood what had happened, and she visualized the whole scene as clearly as if she had witnessed it, knew that the thunder still ringing in her ears was the sound of heavy blasting which had been used to try and stop the herd, and knew now that Black Jack had lost. For the cattle were heading the wrong way.

For a few moments she watched, still with no premonition of the real vastness of the herd, part of which was hidden behind the swell of ground, partly shut away by the churning dust. Then, as the first of them hit Drove City, and she saw the frantic efforts of the citizenry to escape, she realized the dreadful potentialities of the force which had been unleashed.

Even then, however, it did not occur to her that she herself was in any danger. She had dismounted, but was well off to one side. She watched, breathless, the surging destruction of Drove City—saw the Drovers, standing above the rest of the wreckage, holding valiantly on like a lighthouse amid breakers. Something caught in her throat as it wavered and crashed as well. There went her home, the fine things which Black Jack had given her, of which, for a few brief hours, she had been so proud.

Eyes blinded again by sudden tears, she looked up, startled, at a fresh roll of hoofs, then stared, appalled. More of the herd was surging into sight over the rise, and they had spread now far to the side. With a sudden realization that danger could lurk, even here, she turned to reach her horse.

Only a few moments before, it had been grazing, with dropped reins,

only a little way off. But now it had flung up its head, eyes widening, nostrils flaring. She called to it, trying to keep the panic out of her voice, but it did not pay any attention. It was starting to trot away, and the next moment it lifted its head high and broke into a frenzied gallop.

Jinny flung a glance over her shoulder, and felt her heart jump. It looked like a tidal wave coming toward her now, and desperately, realizing the futility of it as she did so, Jinny ran. Always fleet-footed, for a little way she managed to hold her own. But after the first dash she could not maintain that headlong pace, and now she was losing, the herd steadily gaining. The bellowing in frenzied throats was like a knell of doom.

Lungs burning, her legs leaden, Jinny ran on. She knew that Red, in similar case, a few days before, had managed to save himself. But the situation was vastly different. Then there had been a few hundred head, and they were scattering. Here the whole mass of tens of thousands was pushing from behind, and nothing could survive that. If only they would turn!

But while she realized that this was really the edge of the big bunch, she knew that they would certainly engulf her. Hopelessness surged in her, with only fear driving her forward. Then she heard a shout, hoarse but desperate, and hope sprang up in her again. A horseman was riding frantically to reach her—Black Jack!

He was within a dozen paces of her when his horse fell in a headlong sprawl. The scream which rose in Jinny's throat seemed to catch there and choke her, and she heard no sound at all, but that might have been because no such sounds could make themselves heard now above the mighty thunder which beat at and overwhelmed them. Black Jack had flung to one side, and she ran toward him.

The horse was up again, but one glance told the end of hope. It had put its foreleg in a gopher hole, and that foreleg hung now, broken, while the poor beast shivered and tried to run on three faltering legs ahead of the herd.

Black Jack was coming unsteadily to his feet. Jinny stumbled in her haste and fell sprawling, and the next instant he was above her, seeking to protect her with his own body, his arms around her. And in that moment the herd was upon them.

RED RODE slowly now, knowing grimly that the need for haste was past. The herd was gone, but dust still eddied and drifted like a fog, and where Drove City had stood and vaunted itself proudly was only a trampled desolation.

He heard his name called, and reined around sharply, the apprehension showing for a moment before he could mask it out of his face, as Cherry rode to join him. For this one time, he didn't want her here, didn't want her to see what he knew he must discover.

"They must be somewhere around here, Red," Cherry said, and her voice was steady, though her face was bloodless. "I saw them, too."

"Yes," Red agreed. "Somewhere around here, Cherry."

Since she had seen, and ridden this way as well, there was nothing else to do. They would face it together, and now he was glad that he was here, to help her. Cherry was a daughter of the frontier, and she could face even this. Whatever came from here on out, Red knew, they would face together.

He was off his horse then, walking forward. For a moment he was uncertain, and then he knew. This was the place. Black Jack had used his head and his gun to good purpose. Even with the herd upon them, he had managed to kill two big steers, at close range, so that the one had tumbled almost upon the other. Behind that barricade, close up to the still palpitant bodies, he had crouched with Jinny in his arms.

But such a barrier had not been enough—not when the buildings of Drove City had crashed in the storm of stampede. There was just enough left of the two steers to be sure there had been two of them. And of Black Jack Driscoll to know that it was

Black Jack who had died in the tradition of his gay and careless years.

Expecting nothing, Red lifted him, from where he was w dged half under and against the long back of one of the steers. He dropped on his knees in staring unbelief as Jinny stirred a little, then Cherry was beside him and they had her out.

She was bloody, from the blood of the steers and of Black Jack, and bruised and disheveled. But strangely calm, and, as she protested, not much hurt. Somehow, with the barricade to assist him, Black Jack had managed to protect her. And it had been only the edge of the stampede which had passed her, a comparative backwater of the whole.

"Jinny!" said Cherry, and cradled her in her arms.

"It's all right," Jinny said. "He loved me—and I think he knew that I loved him. It couldn't work out—the forces he had set in motion were too big, even for him." She looked at Red, slowly. "You told me once, Red, that playing with fire could be a mighty hot business! You were right. But if I had it to do over again, I guess I'd do the same thing. With my eyes open, this time. Whatever else he was, he was a fire to warm the heart of the likes of me!"

THEY carried Black Jack back, not to where his town had been, but to Barrier, to the burial ground of the Irvings. And while the distant voice of the big herd, slowly being separ.ed again into trail herds, came muted on the wind, and other herds came up from the south and vanished across the horizon on the long trek north, it was Red who said a few words for his friend, with Jinny leaning on the arm of her father, and Mac, looking like a shadow of himself, but coming that far with Tara. Then, when the cowboys had gone, Red turned away as well, to find Cherry waiting for him.

"There's peace here now, Red," she said. "Do you think you can stand it?"

Red looked at the fresh mound, and then at her. His smile was grave. "Peace," he said, "is mostly a matter of the mind and heart. Some men find it, even on the turbulent trail, and in the midst of battle. And others I've seen who never smelled powder-smoke or saw red blood flow, but never really knew the meaning of the word. But if I can come home to you at night, Cherry—then, whatever the day holds, there'll be peace and plenty for me. Do you think you could stand a man turbulent as I am, Cherry?"

Cherry smiled, a little wistfully.

"I told you once, never to set your foot on Barrier again," she said. "That was by way of warning! But since you've chosen so steadily to disregard it, even when you knew from the start that I was out gunning for you—now you'll have to take the consequences, I'm afraid! For I'm turbulent, too, and you once said—" she waited, watching him.

"That cherries are my favorite fruit!" Red echoed, and gathered her into his arms.

"And cherries are ripe," she murmured, her voice muffled.

COMING NEXT ISSUE

A Brand New Novel by

LEE FLORENN

featuring Buck McKee and Tortilla Joe

MILK RIVER RANGE

TEN FEET FROM DEATH

By J. A. Rickard

FRANK GHOLSON, who was Indian fighter, Confederate soldier, and for many years a Texas Ranger, had many narrow escapes. His closest one though, he used to tell, was in a cottonwood gulch in the old Indian Territory, in the fall of 1859.

He had been with his company into the Indian territory chasing Comanches, from which place he was called home by the death of his father. He had to make the return trip on horseback, by himself, through Indian infested country.

On his fourth night going south he camped in a gulch over-hung by cottonwood trees and butting into the side of a higher table land. Being afraid the scent of cooked meat might betray him, he ate his bacon raw. His faithful horse ate cottonwood leaves.

He had already seen many Indian signs and had found the body of one man who had been scalped, but he had not seen any Indians. About midnight they came—a large band of Comanches on the move. They had their families and belongings, including several hundred horses. They passed on all sides of his hiding place.

The snorting of his horse woke him, and before he knew what was happening, moving animals were all around him. He grabbed his mount by the hose, to keep him from making a noise and thus informing the enemy of his hideout. The animal reared up, but Frank held on, and gradually he was quieted down.

The loose horses were followed by Indian drivers, some of whom passed within ten feet of the hidden man and horse. Finally came the squaws, with their teepee poles dragging on the grounds behind their mounts and making an unearthly noise. From his cottonwood cover the Ranger could hear the shrill chatter of the squaws, along with their blows on the slow moving animals.

For three hours he stood in one spot, hearing death ride by. When the last enemy stragglers had passed, the hand that held the halter rope and the one on the horse's nose were so stiff that he could not move his fingers. But he was thankful, for he had not been discovered.

He celebrated with a broiled bacon breakfast, and he gave the Indians plenty of time before he moved on. "I had no further trouble on my journey," he said later, "but that one night gave me plenty of gray hairs."

(THE END)

THE BRANDED COWBOY

It was not the cattle but the cowboy who first received the hot branding iron. Spanish overlords who came to America enslaved Indian natives to watch over the cattle they had brought from Spain. The Spaniards branded these slave cowboys in the middle of the forehead, so the poor fellows could not get lost or stolen from the herds they tended. These slaves lived in mean little lean-tos constructed of brush. Their food was boiled corn meal; their clothing a breach clout. In spite of the harsh treatment of their masters these cowboys were loyal. Afoot, with a club for a weapon, they watched over the herds oft times fighting off wild animals that would have attacked and torn to pieces the bovine beasts. In such pursuit the Indian slave cowboys risked their lives and many were thusly killed.

COLTS SPEAK OF PEACE

By Cliff Campbell

It was either a case of fighting—and killing—
or watching the work of years undone.

THE EARLY forenoon sun shone brightly through the clean windows of the Mercantile Department Store. Ten-year-old Hank McLeary, red-headed and freckled-faced, stood with a small mirror in one grimy hand and reflected a bead of dancing sunlight across the counters and shelves. The ray swept along the wall, dazzling in its brilliance, and rested flatly in the eyes of Ben Matson who sat in the back of the store and talked with Jim McLeary, his partner, about merchandise and six-guns—and sudden death.

Ben Matson put his hands over his eyes to shut out the beam. "Put the mirror away, Hank," he said. "That's hard on a fellow's eyes."

Jim McLeary turned on his chair and glared at his kid brother. He was

like the rest of the McLeary tribe—short and stubby and red-headed. "Enough is enough, Hank," he said angrily. "You get out of here now. Put that danged mirror away and go out in the store room and sort out spuds."

Young Hank turned the reflection on the wall. It danced jerkedly across bolts of gingham and satin, and glistened from canned goods. "In a little while," he said. "This is Saturday an' first thing I know Monday'll be here an' I'll have to go back to that danged school." He turned the reflection out the window hoping to blind some passerby.

Blocky Jim McLeary tapped the printed list that lay on the desk. "We got to let this go out, Ben! We got to undersell Mike Brady or we'll go out of business! And the goods we have here on this sale-list will bring people into our store!"

"And probably bring us a couple of bullets through the guts," said Ben Matson quietly. He regarded the list carefully, fully aware of his partner's sharp eyes and his partner's thoughts.

"We've eaten enough of Mike Brady's dirt," said Jim McLeary. He drew his broad forehead into a deep frown. "Anyway, I have, Ben."

Ben Matson knew what his partner was driving at. He was the same as calling him a coward. They had run the Mercantile in Red Rock for almost five years. Then, about a year ago, Mike Brady had moved in with his money and bought out the Emporium, right across the street.

Brady bought out other interests, too: the only lumberyard, the Singing Star Saloon, the Hardware Store, the drug store and the barber shop. He had offered to buy the Mercantile but Ben Matson and Jim McLeary would not sell. Brady had threatened to drive them out of business, and he had lowered his prices below wholesale. He made enough money in his saloon and lumberyard and drugstore to balance the loss sustained in the Emporium. And slowly and surely he had been breaking the Mercantile's finances.

But the month before Jim McLeary had made contacts with another wholesale house and had bought in carload lots. Thus he could undersell Mike Brady and still make a little profit. The bill on the desk represented their first sale in over a year. Ben Matson studied the bill and thought of six-guns.

"We're not gunmen, Jim," he said slowly. "Mike Brady is. He made his money hunting down criminals involved in the Wire Cutter's war of Texas. He aims to control this town, and this bill will make him pull his gun against us."

"I'd rather be a dead brave man," said Jim McLeary hotly, "than to be a live coward, Ben!"

BEN MATSON leaned back in his chair. He was only in his middle twenties, as was his partner, but he looked ten years older.

"It still adds up to gunplay, Jim," he said.

"Listen—" Jim McLeary stopped as his sister entered. She was a slim girl with fine, golden hair. She was neat and pretty and she was the woman that Ben Matson was to marry in the next week.

"What's the matter, Ben?" she asked gaily. "You look like a walking funeral. And you, too, Jim—why the crepe hanging?"

Jim McLeary's voice was too hard. "Ben's afraid to have us run this handbill out. By hades, Ben, are we running a store here, or are we cowtowing to Mike Brady like a couple of homeless curs?"

Young Hank, who had managed to dazzle the reflection from the mirror into a few eyes on the sidewalk, looked up at his brother's harsh tones, then turned the beam into Leona McLeary's eyes.

Jim McLeary got to his feet. "Listen, Bank," he said, "for the last time, put that mirror away! Now get out there and sort those spuds or I'm beating the pants off you!"

"Keep your shirt on," said Hank. He gave Leona the mirror. "Keep this for me, Sis, until old sourpuss here learns to take a joke—"

Jim grabbed for him but the kid was already through the door. He set-

tled back in his chair, grumbling under his breath. "Well, Ben?" he demanded.

Ben Matson stalled. He looked at Leona. "What do you say, Leona?"

The girl was silent for a long moment. Ben Matson saw the indecision in her eyes, and read rightly her deep frown. He wondered about himself, too. Was he a coward, or did he just want peace so badly?

Finally Leona spoke. "If you want to stay in business, you have to make sales. That bill will bring people into the Mercantile. I guess a human has to fight for whatever he wants."

"And we'll fight Mike Brady!" declared Jim McLeary.

Ben Matson gave in. "All right," he said. "We'll have those distributed."

"That's the stuff," said Jim McLeary. But his voice, Ben Matson noticed, was tinged with indecision, although the blocky man tried to hide it. "Hey, Hank, go out and get your gang of kids. We got some handbills to distribute around town."

CUSTOMERS were coming in so Jim McLeary went to the front of the store. Leona went to a desk and started work on the books. Ben Matson set there and thought of a man's duty—and wondered if he were a coward.

He said, "I don't know how to handle a gun, Leona. I've only shot a pistol about a dozen times in my life."

She frowned. "Maybe it won't be guns, Ben."

Hank came in with his gang. There were six of the boys—two young Mexicans, a thick young Swede, and three Cheyenne lads. Ben distributed the handbills between them and then Hank outlined the sections of town each would take.

One of the Cheyenne's asked, "Maybe Mike Brady him no like this, huh? Maybe him try to stop us?"

"We'll fix him," said Hank confidently.

They trooped out and Ben heard them hollering outside, "Sale! Sale at the Merc! Here's a bill, mister! Sale!" Their voices died. Ben smiled wryly. "Anyway, Mike Brady can't help but hear about our sale."

They were getting a carload of sugar in and Ben went to the depot. The sun was bright and the high air was clear and clean. Rigs were coming into town for this was the day when farmers and ranchers came to town for supplies. The mountains to the west were gray against the distance and serene in their magnificent heights.

The sugar had come in on the night local. Ben went to the dray office and Joe Carter said he would start unloading inside of an hour. Ben stood there and looked out across the town. He saw one of the Cheyenne boys going from door to door, leaving his bills.

People were reading the bills on the street. One farmer and his wife were standing beside their wagon scanning the list of commodities on sale. People were going into the Mercantile, too, and Ben saw that the Mercantile was getting far more trade than the Emporium.

Ben saw one of the Cheyenne boys coming. The young buck's wiry black hair was unbraided and his bronzed face was bloody around his flat nose. "What happened, Big Man?" asked Ben.

"One of Mike Brady's men, he take my bills. He slap me. I kick him and then run. He made my nose bleed a little. Not much, though. I want more papers to leave."

Ben Matson was very quiet. "There are more in the Merc," he finally said.

The Indian went to the store. Ben had no desire to work that day. Fact was, old man James and his wife had come in to work that day, so he was not really needed. Mike Brady came down the street toward him. Ben moved back against a building and waited, something cold and heavy inside of him.

MIKE BRADY was a big man. He was not tall, but he was wide. He wore a Colts .44, the loaded cartridge belt sagging across his big paunch. He wore a blue, uncreased suit, and a cigar rolled on his thick lips.

He said, "You got a sale on, huh, Matson?"

"Yes."

Brady was studiously thoughtful for a long moment. He let the time build up until it became heavy and embarrassing. He said, then, "You better get out of Red Rock, Matson. That goes for Jim McLeary, too. I'll buy you out at a fair price." His voice was undertoned with patient anger.

"Not a *fair* price," said Ben Matson. "You mean *your* price, Brady."

Mike Brady had his hand on his .44. Finally he drew his hand back. "You should have a gun on you, Matson," he purred. "A man needs one in Red Rock, you know. Hard telling what a man might run into and would have to use a gun on."

"I don't need one," said Ben.

Brady's eyes were sharp. "I say you do," he corrected. "Somebody's going to die in this town in the near future. And I don't think it will be me."

Conflicts were raging in Ben Matson, and he wondered if his face showed them. Anger was running through him, roiling him and causing bitterness to permeate him, but he managed to hold it. For he knew it would only cause his death.

Mike Brady saw this in him, and read it for cowardice. His smile was thin across his thick lips, and an arrogance took him and made that smile cynical.

He said, "Be out of town by midnight tonight."

Ben Matson was silent.

Mike Brady went down the street then, his boots solidly beating the plank sidewalk. A number of people had been watching them. They drifted away and went to their duties. Leona McLeary had been watching from the door of the Mercantile.

Now she came toward Ben. And Ben, watching her proud, straight body, felt something surge through him, and he wondered if he would die for her. He wondered, also, if he were really a coward, or if he was only intelligent enough to know the odds were too big to fight, that the odds were too much in favor of Mike Brady?

"What did he say?" she asked. He told her and he saw fear in her eyes. Then this fear, fleeting though it was, was gone and a rock-hardness was there. "So it's open war with Mike Brady?"

Ben Matson nodded and said, "Yes."

Suddenly something bright was shining in his eyes. The dazzling light was so sharp it momentarily blinded him. He couldn't see anything except the bright light. Then, as suddenly as it came, it swept away and flashed into Leona's eyes. Young Hank came out from between two buildings, holding his mirror.

"That sure is bright, huh, Ben?"

Leona said, angrily, "Hank, you shine that in anybody's eyes again, and I'm giving you a licking. Here, give me that mirror!" She grabbed it from him. The kid smiled, the freckles on his nose grouping into a compact splotch.

"I'll get another," he told Ben Matson. "I need some more handbills. Say, one of Brady's men tried to stop Big Man. Big Man kicked him in the guts."

"Be careful, Hank," said Leona. The kid turned and went into the Mercantile. His sister put the mirror in the palm of her hand and flashed a beam against the side of a building, centering it on a big knot. "That boy is always in trouble." She put the mirror in her pocket.

"Sign he's healthy," said Ben Matson.

Ben had told her that Mike Brady had given him orders to leave Red Rock, but he noticed she carefully avoided asking him whether he was going to go. He was glad of that; she was leaving him to fight his battle alone, and not attempting to change or influence his decision.

HE ATE dinner at the Silver Spur. Janie, the fat, heavy-set proprietor, struck up a conversation with him, but he was not in a mood to talk, and the woman soon saw this, and let him eat in silence. The meal finished, he went to the Mercantile.

Leona was waiting on customers at the linen counter. He went back to the office and waited until she was free, then he asked her where Jim McLeary was.

"He went out to the C Bar Z," said Leona. "Mr Jones and his wife aren't so well, and they got word into town that they needed some articles, and Jim took the buckboard and hauled them out to the old folks. He left just before noon."

Ben went out to the storeroom. Hank had the three Cheyennes at work sorting spuds. He sat on a box, flashing a beam around the room with his mirror, and he hurriedly put it in his pocket when Ben came in.

"We're doing all right," the kid said hurriedly. "These boys are working for me. We'll sort these spuds in no time, Ben. What're you going to do about Mike Brady?"

Ben thought, *So it's gone all over town. . .and everybody, even the kids, know about Brady's orders.* He did not answer but he went back into the store. When he came out on the front sidewalk, Mike Brady stood across the street and watched him as he went to his room in the hotel. Ben felt all too keenly the imprint of the heavy man's deliberate gaze.

He said hello to the old clerk and climbed the creaking stairs to his room. He pulled out a suitcase from under the bed and started filling it with shirts and soxes. He stopped, thinking of Leona McLeary. Her hair was golden and her eyes were bright. He saw the clean, firm lines of her body, and he sat down on the bed and held his head in his hands.

She had been the one, and he had known that the minute he had seen her. She had come home from college and she had stepped off the train, and Jim had introduced his twin sister to his partner. Ben Matson had, strangely, been silent, and he had felt a new phase of his life unfolding, and that unfolding had held a great promise. And now, because of greed and a man's gun, he was about to roll that promise up, and store it forever in his memory.

He got to his feet. He unpacked the suitcase, shoving it back under the bed. Carefully he restored the clean shirts to their original places in the dresser drawers. He washed his hands carefully and went down the stairs to where the old clerk sat alone on his high stool, reading a magazine.

"John," he asked, "have you got a pistol you'll let me use?"

The old man lifted watery eyes, and Ben saw a light sneak into the tired eyes. John said, almost brokenly, "There's one under the counter, Ben," and he pulled the .45 and its belt out. "The boss left it there for me to use if I had to. But you're welcome to it."

Ben buckled the belt around his hips, pulling it tight. He pulled the gun out, pointing it toward the floor, and he managed to check the loads in the cylinder. He shoved the loading gate back into place and stuck the Colt again into the holster.

He said, "I'm not much of a hand with a gun."

Old John was silent.

OUTSIDE, the sun had sunk rather low, its rays slanting across the town. Suddenly a buckboard wheeled across the light, and ran in fast with its team at a wild trot and with spinning wheels that tossed dust behind them.

Somebody hollered, "That's Jim McLeary's team and rig, and Jim's on the bed of it, and Marty Castle is driving the horses!"

Castle pulled the rearing team to a sliding halt in front of the doctor's office. He hollered, "Hey, doc, I've got a wounded man here! He's been shot and he needs help. Some of you gents help me get him out and inside. Careful, now, careful!"

Ben Matson was hurrying forward, and he was cold inside. When he got to the office, they had already carried Jim McLeary inside. The redheaded man was groaning as he lay on the cot. Ben knelt beside him while Doc Smith got the people outside. Marty Castle, a rough-handed farmer, stayed with Ben.

Ben knew without asking what had happened, but he put his question into words regardless. Doc Smith

came over and Ben helped him take off Jim's shirt. The red-head had been shot once, high on the right ribs. Jim looked up at Ben and grinned, and started to talk.

"Don't talk," said Doc Smith.

Jim closed his eyes again, his lips twisted with pain. Marty Castle said, "I saw the team, first. They'd run down the road and stopped beside my pasture fence. It's a wonder they hadn't busted the buggy all up, but they hadn't. So I backtracked, recognizin' the team as belonging to Jim, and I finally found him in the cattails and rushes along Fern crick. I hollered and he answered, or else I'd never have found him."

"What do you say happened?" asked Ben quietly.

Marty Castle lifted his shoulders, let them drop. "Somebody'd ambushed him, I'd say. Only thing that could happen, Ben. You see, Jim killed the gent that had shot him—I found his body in the rushes, and I left him there. Then Jim crawled off into the rushes and hid, prob'ly figuring there was another ambusher, maybe, and he had to get away, and his team run off."

Ben asked, "Who's the dead man?"

"Kirk Watson."

Ben got to his feet; he stood there and looked down, and Jim opened his eyes. "So I *did* kill the dog," he said.

"Be quiet," said Doc Smith.

Jim closed his eyes. Ben walked into the outer room and the doctor followed. Ben asked, "What are the damages, Doc?"

"He'll come through. The bullet went right on, and the wound is clean. He's bled enough to purify it." The doctor's eyes were steady behind the glasses. "Don't do anything foolish, Ben. You're no gunman."

BEN NODDED absently, and went outside. Leona and Hank were just entering the office, and they stopped and their eyes held their questions. The cockiness had left young Hank, and he held his sister's hand, the freckles standing out against his skin.

"He'll come through nicely," said Ben. "Doc just told me so."

"Who shot him?" asked Leona.

"Kirk Watson. Jim killed him."

Leona's eyes were quiet in anger. Hank blustered out with, "I wish I was a man, I'd kill Mike Brady!" Leona said, "Hank, be quiet," and for once the boy obeyed. They stood there, three people bound together by tragedy and the fear of the future, and Ben Matson knew, and felt himself the center of the vortex. And then Leona noticed the gun on his hip.

"Where did you get that?"

"From old John, at the hotel."

He saw something move across her eyes then. She understood. He had made his decision, and borrowed the gun, and stepped out and then Marty Castle had brought Jim McLeary into town. The shooting of Jim had not brought his decision about; he and his thoughts—and she herself—had been instrumental in reaching his mental conclusion.

"Ben," she said, "be careful. Please, now, Ben."

He looked across the town, but did not see it. He wanted to say something, and he was afraid—desperately, violently afraid. And he wondered about that, and he came to the conclusion finally. He was not afraid of death, he was afraid of losing her.

He kissed her.

HE LEFT them standing there, and went to one of Mike Brady's men who stood across the street. This man was a thin, wiry man and he wore two guns. His eyes were on him, and Ben Matson walked up to him. Ben hit him once. The man staggered back, his arms waving, until he settled against the building behind him. Ben Matson had his guns out, then; it had a peculiar weight.

"Go tell Mike Brady I want to see him."

The man spat blood. "What t'hades has got into you? I'll kill you—"

"You'll get out of town," said Ben Matson quietly. He cocked his Colt. "But first you'll tell Mike Brady I'm out for him."

The man's eyes were yellow with fear. "Be careful with that pistol," he said hoarsely. He turned and almost

ran for the Emporium. Ben Matson put his back against the building and waited. He holstered his iron, but kept the hammer back. Now all he had to do was pull it free and hit the trigger.

He glanced across the street, and men and women had pulled back and they were watching him. Young Hank stood alone in front of the doctor's office, but he could not see Leona. And, while he was watching, Hank turned and went between two buildings, hurrying and running. Ben wondered where Leona was, and where the kid was going, but he did not keep these thoughts long. For Mike Brady came from the Emporium.

Brady stood there for a long moment, rolling his cigar. He had pulled his gun forward, and it lay against his thigh. He did not speak; no words were needed. He came forward, finally, and as he stepped from the street, he spat the cigar into the dust. The smoke of it idly lifted upward.

Ben Matson waited, and fear was with him. Somehow, he held it back, and he pulled his nerves together. His right hand was on his holstered gun, and he felt the rough boards rub against his back. He watched Mike Brady come ponderously toward him.

Now Brady had reached the middle of the street. And now, too, Ben noticed the spot of brightness on the man's chest. It was a bright, vivid spot—a daub of closely concentrated sunlight, and Ben thought momentarily of young Hank's mirror. Then, suddenly, the beam moved to one side, and Ben suspected it had been a reflection from a nearby window.

Mike Brady rasped, "Pull that gun, Matson!" and he was reaching. His gun came up, swift and deadly, and Ben Matson knew that in that speed lay his death. He had his own gun rising, but Brady was ahead.

BRADY'S gun coughed. Ben heard, above the roar, the bullet splatter into the wall beside him. And in the lift of his own gun, Ben Matson read his future. His gun roared and bucked, and Mike Brady went down.

Ben pulled back against the wall, cold and tight inside. Then, suddenly, he realized why Mike Brady had missed, and the thought was sick in him. For the beam of light lay still across the dead man's face, and Ben knew that it came from a mirror. Even as he watched, the light lifted and ran into nothing in the thin air. The blinding glare had thrown Mike Brady's aim wide, and thereby saved Ben's life.

The town marshal came up and said, "It was a fair fight, Matson. You killed in self defense. We're running the Brady men out of Red Rock."

"Do that," murmured Ben. He turned and looked at a second-story window in the hotel. He caught a bit of movement behind the glass, and then he walked across the street. His boots were slow and as he walked he dropped the gun into the dust. He entered the lobby and said, "Your gun's out there, John" and the old clerk, understandingly, said "I'll pick it up, Ben."

Ben said, "Thanks, John."

He was climbing the steps then, his weight heavy on his knees. He had expected to find young Hank in his room, but when he opened the door Leona sat on the bed, her head against the pillow. He sat down beside her.

He asked, "You flashed the mirror into his eyes?"

She did not look up. She spoke from the depths of the pillow. "I had to, Ben. I couldn't let you die. It's an awful thought—sending a man to his death, but I had to save you. Ben."

He nodded quietly. "Nobody will ever know, Leona. Nobody on the street saw it except me, and I did because I was so close to him." The thing had added up and he had found the answer.

She sat up. "Ben—"

He kissed her, then. Her lips were moist and warm, and Ben Matson felt the fires roar through him. The days ahead were bright and clear, and a man could walk them in peace and pride. . .

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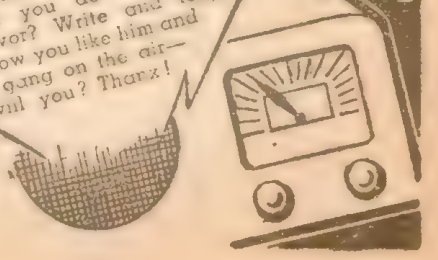

GUNFIRE MAKES OUR HONEYMOON

By Ralph Berard

Author of "Gun Trail To Adventure," "Indian Horse Thieves," etc.

Jim Fletcher's Tactics Against Pete Gelden Looked Just Plumb Mad — But Jim Had a Method!

JIM FLETCHER stood twirling his hat nervously, afraid to face June. "It ain't that I've changed my mind or think less. . Gosh, June, I'm more'n love with you than ever but. . . . "

June Burns cut in altogether too sweetly, "But. . . but what, Mister Fletcher?"

Her tone startled Jim. Her lips began trembling and her face suddenly flushed. Jim never could understand women, least of all June. When she'd finally given her consent after the half dozen attempts he'd made to propose, he'd been the happiest stage-driver west of the Mississippi. What he was trying to tell her was meant to assure their happiness and he couldn't see why she didn't understand it that way.

His horse tugged at the bridlestrap looped around his elbow, as if hinting they ought to get out of here quick. Jim's heart was pounding; his lips felt dry. He'd rather be again facing the guns of the pair of bandits who had held him up on the Sheep Creek run three months before and got away with ten thousand dollars in new gold pieces after a rifle bullet, fired from ambush, had knocked him unconscious. The robbers had left Jim for dead and when he had come around, he hadn't felt a bit worse than he did right now. Telling

June why they'd have to postpone their wedding was worse than getting killed half a dozen times.

"Not having enough money has wrecked more marriages than anything else," he struggled on. "Gosh, June, I've saved up five hundred dollars and it's in the bank in your name. That ought to prove that I. ."

"It isn't money I want," the girl exploded. Her pretty face suddenly flooded with tears. He took her arm to keep her from running up the board walk into the house. "That ain't what I mean, honey. I know it ain't the money but we got to have some to live on. I'm just suggestin' we wait six months till this depressed condition due to the draught is over. Jerry Fleiness had to let me go because so many of his drivers been with him longer. Those boys would howl their heads off if he let them go. He promised me a better run with bigger pay in the spring."

June struggled against her tears with an inadequate handkerchief. "I don't see why you want to put the wedding off. You could find another job."

Jim shook his head. "You know better, June. You were raised in this cattle country and you know getting a job in these times means punching cows fort grub and a bed. That wouldn't be no married life for us."

"We have the five hundred dollars." June's eyes seemed pleading.

"You said yourself we'd have to have a thousand. We agreed not to live with your folks and I ain't got no folks."

June's wide eyes looked past him. They were dry now. "I know," she said. Suddenly she grabbed his arm and put her head against his shoulder. She began to sob all over again. "But what'll my friends think, Jim?" Tears stopped her from saying more.

JIM STOOD there, feeling as useless as a fifth leg on a newborn calf. Why were women always worrying about what people thought? Suddenly what he had been thinking while riding home to Cattle Center came back to his mind. He tried to lift June's face and kiss her. "June," he said with sudden enthusiasm, "maybe we can get married even sooner than we planned and have lots of money, too."

She got her head off his shoulder and looked at him as if willing to humor an insane person. "Are you going to rob a bank?"

"I'm going to prove up on a homestead," he said.

June stared at him. He guessed she sure thought he was loco now. "I thought you were going to rob a bank," she said.

"You know that high spot on Prairie River where the stream makes the sharp turn? It's high land, rising vertically out of the river, and it has a view over all the surrounding country."

June frowned. She stared at him incredulously. "It's absolutely worthless, Jim. You couldn't get water on it unless you bailed it out of the river in a bucket. Nothing would grow there, not even grass enough for a cow. You can't ride a horse to it."

"Yes you can," Jim insisted, "from the north side. The river only runs on three sides. Pete Gelden owns all the land across the river; that's what interests me most."

"Pete Gelden's got a terrible reputation," June said. "Nobody likes him."

Jim realized she had stopped crying. Maybe his crazy words interested her; maybe she was concerned about his sanity. Anyway, he decided to keep her curious if that would keep her from crying. Taking her abruptly into his arms, he kissed her, then laughed. "Yes, sir, June, I'm going to homestead Tom Thumb Point."

June tried to ask questions but Jim avoided them. He mounted his horse, smiled at her and rode toward town. He stopped at Sheriff Bat Bergren's office, had a brief talk with the heavy-set, capable old lawman, then crossed the street to the U. S. Land Office

The office was locked and Jim had to wait two hours before Bill Slade, deputy land commissioner, showed up to tell him he was sure plumb

loco if he figured on proving up on Tom Thumb Point. "You got to live there," the land commissioner told him looking over his spectacles. "There's no way to haul lumber up there for a shack. The wind would blow it off the bluff if you did build one. You can't get water. They's no grass for a horse nor a cow."

"Ill live in a hole," Jim said "There must be rabbits for food."

"I doubt it," Slade grumbled. He sudenly gave Jim an unusually close scrutiny. "You ain't loco, be ye, lad?"

"Maybe," Jim admitted in a slightly reminiscent tone. He was wondering about it a little himself as he signed the papers, then Slade told him he could start living on that dry mud heap over the river any time he liked.

Jim told the land agent not to take any wooden nickels or bad gold pieces, then went across to Joe Henry's general store. He knew Henry had a second hand telescope he had picked up from a U. S. Cavalry officer during one of the Indian uprisings and he purchased that first. He bought a tent, two short handled shovels, a .35-.44 rifle with plenty of ammunition, two water pails, two hundred feet of quarter inch hemp rope, a long fish line and plenty of groceries. He had Henry split a bail of hay and tie half on each side of Jim's horse so the beast would have food.

It was evening when Jim started his slow march toward Tom Thumb Point. Besides the new rifle, he carried the big sixgun which usually hung at his right hip. He whistled at the stars to keep from thinking too much and turned the back of his head toward the fresh night breeze which he knew would be a gale on top of the barren clay bluff he soon intended calling home. Whistling helped to keep him from thinking about June, too. He didn't like thinking of the uncertain way he had left her. Whistling kept him from thinking too much about Pete Gelden also. Gelden was damn dangerous and Jim knew it. A man doesn't like to think that maybe he is embarking on a loco scheme that like as not will result in nothing more profitable than getting himself killed.

* * *

THREE DAYS later, just about high noon, Jim was standing with the .35-44 rifle swung above his elbow, watching two horsemen ride toward him over the long narrow ridge which was the only way a horse could get to the tip of Tom Thumb Point. Jim was bare-headed. The wind stood his black hair upright, making him look even taller than his slender six feet. Behind him was a hole which he dug, eight feet deep and twelve in diameter. He had pitched his pup tent on the level bottom. His supplies were inside the tent and, so long as his horse stood with rump to the wind, Jim felt fairly certain none of his possessions would be blown off the bluff which dropped vertically on three sides into the turn of the river a hundred feet below. But there was no escape for him from this place except to northward where Pete Gelden and Gelden's dark-visaged foreman, Sake Gatsin, now came riding toward him.

Jim held the rifle ready. Pete Gelden came up slowly, drawing his horse to a stop only a few feet from Jim. Gelden was a giant. His enormous body was covered with a lose-fitting black coat which the wind tossed about till his angularly-featured face gave him the appearance of a crude, hastily-put-together scarecrow, unaccountably endowed with life. His eyes were black, cruel and threatening as they narrowed on Jim. "Judging from the way you hold that rifle, this don't seem like a friendly greeting."

Jim looked past Gelden to where Sake Gatsin stopped his mount a few feet further back. He looked the smaller, chunkier man over closely, then returned his eyes to Gelden. "The rifle's not pointed your direction," he drawled easily, "but it will be the next time you ride up here."

"I got as much right here as you have," Gelden said.

"U-uh." Jim shook his head. "Not

any more, Gelden. I'm homesteadin' this land. Unless I default on my provin' up, that means this is my home."

Surprise, puzzlement and disbelief struggled to control Gelden's hairy features. "That's a damn lie. Even you wouldn't be dumb enough to. . ."

"Look up the land office record," Jim interrupted. "I got no objection to you being my neighbor as long as you stay on your own side of the river. What objection you got to me staying on my side?"

"You been watchin' every move on my spread with a damn telescope." Gelden snarled.

"How'd you know that, Gelden?" Jim watched Sake Gatsin carefully. The foreman's hand was not far from his sixgun. Jim swung his rifle slightly more to bear.

"I watched you with my own glass," Gelden admitted readily.

Jim favored him with a thin-lipped smile. "Yeah, I saw you yesterday. Seems right fair and even to me. We was looking at each other."

Gelden's face darkened. "You got no business spyin' on me."

JIM MOVED his feet, spreading them apart and sliding the right one a little back. He knew that what he was about to say might start fireworks and he might need every bit of advantage the rifle would give him. "Gelden," he spoke slowly and distinctly so they could both hear above the whine and whistle of the wind, "you and Gatsin held me up on the Sheep Creek run three months back. You took a lot of gold and left me for dead. Later, when you heard I wasn't dead, you thought I must not have recognized you because nobody questioned you."

Gelden tensed. Gatsin dropped his hand half way to his gun and it stopped there. Jim had brought the rifle around a trifle. He continued in a quiet deadly tone, "I didn't talk because I knew you would have an alibi. You been running this ranch out here as a blind for years. Likely you got a half dozen hard case riders that would swear you and Gatsin were on the spread all the day of the robbery. My words alone wouldn't convict you so I figured out this scheme."

There was a long silence. Gelden turned in his saddle and glanced at Gatsin. A rabbit scurried across behind the two horses and Jim swore to himself at seeing it at such a time. Neither Gelden nor Gatsin spoke. Their eyes met and Jim steadied himself for gunplay.

Then Gelden shook his head almost imperceptibly. Gatsin's fingers moved away from his weapon with seeming reluctance. The little gunman grinned threateningly at Jim, showing several black, broken teeth. Gelden smiled in a sarcastic way which plainly intimated Jim was a fool. "I'll give you twenty-four hours to get away from here," he warned. He turned his horse, motioned to Gatsin and Jim watched them ride back the way they had come.

* * *

JIM KNEW Gelden wasn't bluffing. His telescope meant nothing could happen across the river in daylight that Jim didn't know about. Even on a moonlight night, he could see and hear enough to guess pretty well what happened. Gelden couldn't keep using his fake spread as a blind for hold-up operations without Jim sooner or later getting enough information to convict the robbers in court.

In daylight Jim was fairly safe. The sides of the bluff were too steep for man or horse to climb. They rose vertically out of the river. Intruders had to come from the north. Even a man on foot could be seen a mile away. Jim could get into the hole near the entrance of his tent and fire a warning shot at anyone approaching. If they persisted in coming on, he could shoot from shelter for results.

Jim had used his fishline and the light hemp rope with the pail attached to good advantage. Plenty of water and a few good fish had come up the high cliff from the river. He had killed three rabbits but finding fuel to cook them had been harder.

Dead tumbleweeds mostly served the purpose. Besides the hole in which the tent stood, he had dug several smaller holes. He figured definitely that an attack would come. He never moved about the limited area of his high domain without the rifle across his arm and the ready sixgun at his hip.

Gelden's twenty-four hours passed without action. Jim kept one eye to his telescope every few minutes of the day following the bandits' visit but he knew it was the nights he had to worry about. A man has to sleep and a sleeping man has no protection from stealthy attack.

It was one night a week later that the attack came. Jim was asleep. He awoke to the smell of canvas smoke and knew his tent was on fire. The wind whirled and eddied into the hole where the tent stood. Flames leaped upward. They sent jagged red tongues licking at the blackness of the moonless night.

No man could live within that tent and Jim Fletcher did not emerge from it. He had no warning of the attack. When Gelden and Gatsin failed to see any sign of life remaining on the bluff except Jim's horse, they left the horse and retired before the fire burned itself out, fearing some rancher or lone night rider might see the flames on the wind-swept butte and come to investigate. If Jim's charred remains and his neglected horse were found later, the entire matter would appear quite accidental.

The two stage robbers were careful to blot their trails. They rode a long circuitous route back to the spread across Prairie River and, although Pete Gelden used his glass many times in the following days, he saw no sign of human life on the high waste land Jim Fletcher had boasted of homesteading. There was only Jim's horse which seemed to have broken its hobble and now roamed at will in search of whisps of the remaining hay which was scattered about by the wind.

IT WAS AFTER midnight the tenth day after they burned Jim out that Pete Gelden and Sake Gatsin galloped down the lane leading to Gelden's ill-kept ranchhouse in almost pitch darkness. At the end of the lane they leaped from their lathered horses and began dragging a small metal-enforced chest off the back of Gelden's mount. Unexpectedly a quiet-sounding voice drawled from only a few feet away, "You fellows been robbing stages again?"

Gelden spun in the darkness. Gatsin's hand dragged a sixgun from leather. The heavy chest thumped heavily into the dust. Jim Fletcher's provoking drawl continued, "I got you boys covered with a rifle."

Jim's words weren't quite true. It isn't easy to cover two desperate men with a rifle in the almost total blackness of a dark night. Red flame spurted from the sixgun in Gatsin's hand. The lead whistled near enough Jim's ear for him to imagine the sudden buzz of a bee. He answered the fire with a shot from his rifle, then threw himself to the ground. Gelden had dragged a gun. As he also dropped, flame spurted. Sheriff Bergren and a deputy named Calhoun, who had come along to confirm reports Jim had made, opened fire from a hedge of dwarf cottonwoods a few feet from where Jim crouched. Three of Gelden's hired gun-slingers came running from the ranchhouse.

The darkness made the gun battle a loco affair. Jim and the lawmen were caught between the fires of the divided outlaw band but the three killers from the ranchhouse could not tell in the darkness what was happening. They couldn't tell friend from foe.

Jim fired at a dim shadow of movement. A short scream came from Gelden's lips. The outlaw fired twice. Calhoun yelped from near the cottonwoods and answered with three red blasts as he fell. The deputy wasn't killed but he was knocked cold by the blow of Gelden's glancing bullet. Then one of the sheriff's leads caught Gatsin in the leg, broke his ankle bone and prevented the fake foreman from running for it.

The darkness slowed the fight. The outlaws' horses made larger moving shadows through the gloom and disappeared. Jim husbanded his bullets. He crawled forward on his stomach. A belch of flame flashed in his face. The red fire showed him Gelden's evil face momentarily. Jim fired twice, then leaped forward. Both his bullets missed but one freakishly hit the dust so close to the bandit's face that it threw dust in his eyes, temporarily blinding him. Jim brought the barrel of his gun down on Belden's head. The robber groaned and lay still.

Sheriff Bergren disarmed the wounded foreman and all firing stopped abruptly. With Gelden and Gatsin handcuffed, Jim and the sheriff turned back to Calhoun and found the deputy practically unhurt. He had killed one of the three gunmen who had run from the house, had tripped the other two in one quick movement as they tried to leap over what they thought was his dead body. Then he had knocked them unconscious with his sixgun before they could rise. Calhoun began laughing at the ridiculousness of it as he related what had happened. Then he looked suddenly serious and surprised when Jim wiped a handful of congealing blood out of the deputy's hair and said, "A bullet must have clipped your skull pretty close."

With Jim and Bergren tending the prisoners, Calhoun went to the ranchhouse and came back with a lantern. A dipper of cold water brought Gelden back to consciousness and he immediately started swearing.

Jim laughed and helped Bergren and Calhoun get the men onto horses. When they rode into Cattle Center, day was breaking. Jim watched the sheriff lock his five prisoners in cells, then began to yawn. He was decidedly hungry and sleepy but his most urgent desire was to see June Burns.

He talked to Bergren briefly, then walked aimlessly up and down the main street till Charley Ling finally opened his evil-smelling restaurant. All the time, Jim kept thinking of June. But a fellow just couldn't call on a beautiful and proper girl like her at six o'clock in the morning.

He ordered ham and eggs in the Chinaman's and they didn't taste right. Maybe he was nervous and fidgety. It was going to be mighty hard to explain to June that. . . .

AT TEN O'CLOCK he finally mustered nerve to go to June's house. She came onto the porch looking more fresh and beautiful than ever, and wearing a flower in her hair. She frowned at him as if he had committed some unforgivable sin. The sun got in her hair along with the flower. Her eyes looked very blue and they looked at him as if to say, "What loco proposal can I expect from you now?"

Jim groped for words. "I was thinking, June, that maybe, well, you see, there's no use waiting any longer to get married. In ten days I'll have five thousand dollars cash and. . . "

June puckered her pretty forehead. "Jim Fletcher, are you crazy? A few weeks ago you wanted us to wait six months. I just finish telling my friends we're going to wait till you homestead some fool dry-land bluff on a wind-swept, dust-covered, dried-out, good-for-nothing place above Prairie River and then you come around suggesting we get married sooner than we ever planned."

Jim felt more helpless now than any fifth leg on a new-born calf. He finally got to talking, though. "June, I knew Wells Fargo had a standing reward of five thousand for conviction of anyone using armed force to interfere with any shipment they were responsible for. That shipment of new gold from the San Francisco mint originated on their line and they had to pay the loss. Every coin was dated the same year. I knew Pete Gelden and Sake Gatsin did that job but I couldn't prove it."

"So you went homesteading," June suggested very sweetly.

"Uhuh," Jim acknowledged. "And I knew that after what I told Gelden when he came up to scare me off that he'd try burning me out at night. That was the only chance he had to

get rid of me. But he overlooked how simple it was to build a tunnel from under that tent where I could sleep perfectly safely and get nice fresh air through a different hole to the surface while he burned the tent and part of my supplies. I let my horse roam around loose so he'd think I was dead while I laid on my stomach and watched every move he made from behind a pile of tumbleweeds. I'd tipped off the sheriff and several merchants in Cattle Center to watch for those newly dated gold pieces and I saw where Gelden dug up the Wells Fargo chest on his spread after he thought I was dead so it would be safe to spend the money."

June's frown remained deep but her lips parted in surprise. Her look of incredulity began to show a trace of admiration. Jim smiled with new confidence. "The sheriff picked up several of them gold pieces in town. He found the rest hidden on Gelden's spread where I said. Yesterday I saw Gelden was making plans for some new mischief. I tipped the sheriff and we caught him red-handed when he came home and started taking another Wells Fargo chest off his horse."

June closed her mouth and swallowed.

"Can't we get married right away?" Jim pleaded awkwardly. "Bergren says Wells Fargo pays rewards prompt as all get out and that I'll have that five thousand in less than thirty days."

"But, Jim," June objected pouting, "it was you who wanted to postpone our wedding. I've told all my friends that. . . . "

"Oh, the devil with your friends," Jim blurted excitedly.

"Jim Fletcher," June flared, "you can't talk about my. . . . "

The bravery of desperation took hold of Jim. Both his arms went determinedly about her. He kissed her boldly, then said, "If we have to quarrel about your friends, we'll do it after we're married."

To his surprise she said very meekly, "All right, Jim."

Dang it all. Jim Fletcher never could understand women, specially not June Burns.

(THE END)

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By Lee Floren

(Author of "A Mule-Skinner Goes To War," etc.)

It's no joke to have to stand by and watch a good man being murdered!

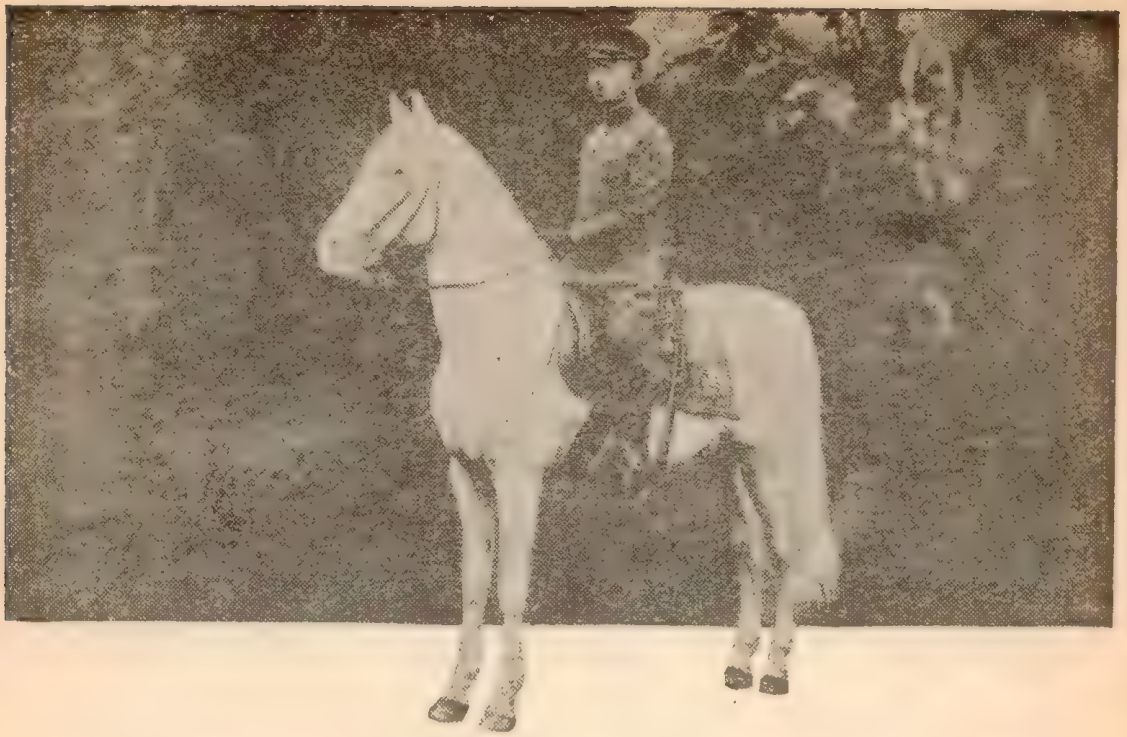
JEFF WILLIAMS was standing beside the bucking chutes when the big man, passing through a group of bronc kickers, bumped into him. The big man growled, "Get outa my way, clown!" Then he stopped and looked at Jeff and said, quietly, "What t'hades you doin' here, fella?"

Jeff studied him for a long second. Then he said, "I could ask you the same. . . ."

The big man's hard eyes were sharp as they moved across Jeff's seamed, weather-roughened face covered with the gaudy grease and paint of the rodeo clown. "I thought you were dead by this time."

Jeff said, "Follow me," and turned toward his tent, there beyond the corrals. The odors of horses and cattle, the sound of people filing into the grandstands, registered dully on him and held no significance. Behind

(Continued On Page 94)



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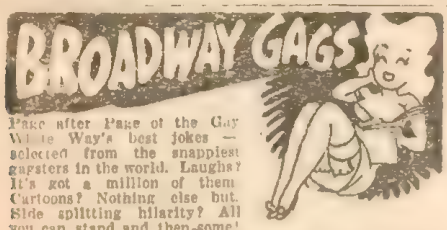

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(Continued From Page 91)

him came the big man's crunching boots.

They entered and Jeff leaned with his back against his dressing table. He was a middle-aged man with thin shoulders and his hair was turning gray. The years had changed the big man, too; seams had gathered around his hard eyes.

There was a silence and Jeff thought of the past and found nothing there but bitterness. Finally he said, "I heard you were in this town. Matt Hawkins."

"My name here isn't Hawkins, it's Matt Jones."

"You can change your name," said Jeff Williams, "but you can't change your dirty, thievin' nature. I had to change my handle, too. Jeff Williams."

"How long you been in the rodeo game?"

"Ever since you went to the pen, Hawkins, almost eleven years now. My missus died."

"Your daughter?"

"Because of her," said Jeff quietly, "I play this town each year. You see, her name is Jackie Smith."

Matt Hawkins' heavy brows rose. "I see—" he murmured. "I know her well. I've heard she took the Smiths' name when they adopted her but I didn't know until now you were her dad. She aims to marry young Tom Larkin, I understand."

"You bought the bank here a year ago," said Jeff. "You run a crooked bank, I hear."

Matt Hawkins studied him. There was something here he did not understand and his brain was looking for the loose ends. Then he got it and he laughed softly.

"So that's why you're here, huh? You heard I was freezin' Tom Larkin outa his outfit, huh?"

Jeff nodded.

ANGER made Hawkins clip his words. "You're smart, Jeff, dollin' up as a rodeo clown! No lawman on earth would expect an outlaw and gunman to parade before the public eye behind grease paint.

(Continued On Page 96)

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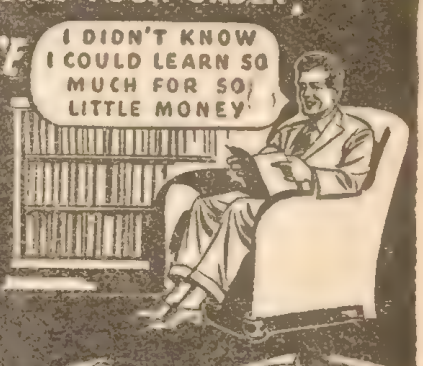

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(Continued From Page 94)

What if your girl found out where you were and what her father had been?"

Jeff said, "If you tell her, I'll kill you, Hawkins!"

Hawkins' eyes were pinpoints. "You double-crossed me once—you won't do it again. When we was robbin' that Nine Pine bank down in Arizona and you ran out an' I walked into them lawman guns. I went to the pen and you went free. I spent almost ten years behind those bars before I busted out. I stuck up a mine payroll, got a stake, skipped into Montana and started my bank."

"Leave Tom Larkin alone," warned Jeff.

"I got Larkin over a barrel."

Jeff said, "I know your game, Hawkins. You sold Tom that place right after you turned banker. Tom's worked hard and built it up to make a future home for Jackie. Now you want to squeeze Tom out an' take back his outfit with you the gainer."

"I'll get it, too." Matt Hawkins' heavy hand rested on his holstered .45.

"I ain't got a gun on me," said Jeff.

"You don't need one," clipped Hawkins. "The judge here is my personal friend; the county attorney is on my payroll. I could kill you and walk free!"

He started his draw.

Jeff hit hard. His blow smashed into Hawkins' belly, stopped his gun-arm momentarily. Hawkins' breath whistled; pain held him. Jeff came in fast.

Jeff's rodeo clowning had made him strong, wiry. Now he used every bit of that strength and speed. He grabbed Matt Hawkins' wrist with both hands, his fingers breaking the skin.

Hawkins cursed, tried to pull his arm around and bring up his .45. Then they struggled for the gun. Slowly Jeff moved the thick arm upright; their breathing was heavy, deadly, as they fought. Slowly Jeff's superior strength won. Hawkins dropped the gun.

Jeff booted the gun out of reach,

(Continued On Page 98)

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(Continued From Page 96)

stepped back. "We're even up now," he panted.

Hawkins stood there, legs spread, nostrils flaring. Jeff saw him coldly measure the distance to the .45. He saw something run across those thin eyes. Hawkins dove for the gun.

Jeff kicked. His boot slapped Hawkins' thick neck, rolled the man over. But Hawkins, as he rolled, grabbed Jeff's boot. They crashed to the ground. The dressing table went down, dumping its load in the dust.

Hard fists beat into Jeff's face. He dug his head down, buried it deep into Hawkins' shoulder. Now the banker was on top, his fists working. Jeff felt the sting of salty blood on his tongue. He whammed his knees up, kneed Hawkins in the belly.

Hawkins went backwards, rolled across a tent stake. For the first time, Jeff noticed they had rolled outside the tent. Cowpunchers stood and watched them. Jeff got to his feet.

"Get up," he said.

Hawkins groaned, spat blood.

Jeff repeated, "Get up!"

"Next time," said Hawkins, "have a gun on you."

Jeff stepped back, hands clenched. He brushed dust from his suit, rubbed his sleeve across his mouth, glanced at the blood. There was a silence and across it Jeff measured this man's power. He had won the first round. But who would win the last?

Jeff picked up the .45 and walked into his tent.

HE RIGHTED his table, automatically replacing his cosmetics. He studied his battered face in the looking glass, and what he saw brought a tight smile to his battered lips.

His makeup was shot; paint had run with sweat and dust. Matt Hawkins' fists had beaten off some. Skilfully his fingers righted the damage. His fingers trembled slightly, he noticed.

He heard the arena boss take up his sing-song tirade through his megaphone. Then the sound of boots,

there at the door, made Jeff turn suddenly. Tom Larkin entered.

He was young, about twenty-two. He was slim, hard-bellied. His face was boyish, he smiled easily; but Jeff knew he was all man—fighting man.

Tom grinned. "They're waitin' for you to lead the parade around the arena, Jeff. What the hell you mean by gettin' into a fight with the local banker? I figured I'd have that chore for myself—"

Jeff smiled crookedly. "Jus' a difference of opinion between us—"

"But heck, I didn't even know you knew him."

"I do—now."

Tom Larkin shrugged. He and Jeff had been friends for about three years—ever since Tom had grown big enough to ride in the rodeo. Tom and Jackie had been going together, even then.

Jeff asked, "Where's Jackie?"

A girl called from outside, "Out here, Jeff. You better rattle your rowels, clown. There goes your call from the rodeo boss again. If you tended to your own business and didn't take time to beat up on bankers—"

Jeff's smile grew. *She's like her mother,* he thought; *even her voice sounds the same.* He liked that thought; it held a great strength.

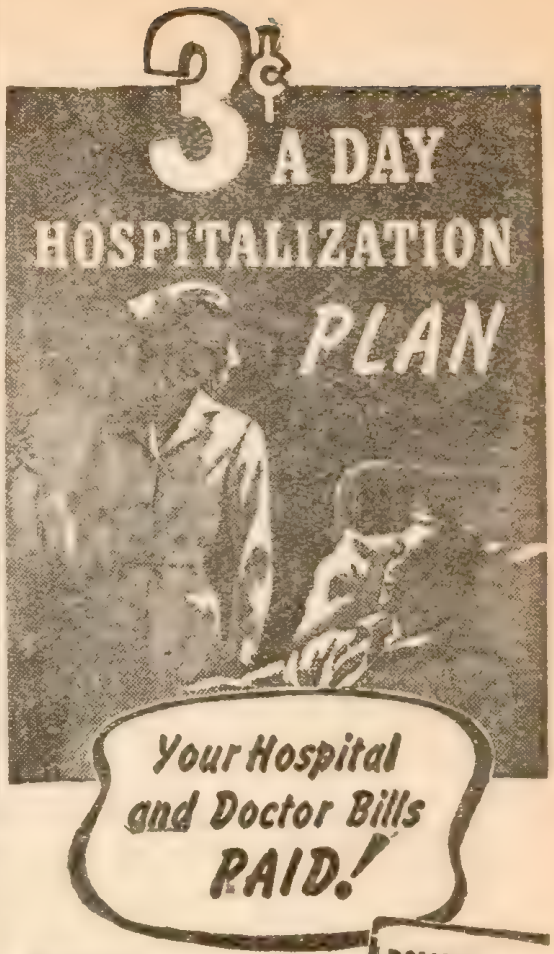
"Be right with you, Jackie."

His dun mule, Curly Socks, waited beside the corral, saddled with the trick-riding kak. Jeff waddled toward him, ludicrous in his patched, baggy pants, his dirty stetson. His face, covered with grease-paint, gave him a dead-pan appearance and hid his thoughts. Curly Socks flattened his ears and kicked at him.

Through long practice, Jeff deftly dodged the hoofs, anchored a stirrup and stepped up. Curly Socks laid down.

Jeff said, sternly, "Get up, mule," and booted the brute in the ribs. Curly Socks shook his homely head and got up, ears still back.

Jeff stepped up again. Behind him, gay with color, the rodeo performers were strung out in a long



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line. Matt Hawkins rode up on a big bay.

Hawkins pulled in close and said, so only Jeff could hear, "Just keep your mouth shut about me an' what you know, fella."

Jeff said, "I'm no fool. You could send me to the pen, Hawkins."

Hawkins looked at him for some time. Jeff tried to read the heavy eyes, found nothing. Then Hawkins turned and rode back and got into line.

Jeff frowned and looked at Jackie. She was dark and clean, and her eyes were bright. "What's the banker doin' in the parade? He ain't no rodeo performer."

"He's riding pick-up man for the bronc busters," she said.

Jeff scowled. "I see—" He turned in his saddle. "Okay, men." They rode into the arena.

THEY were a colorful bunch. Pintos and roans and bays and grays. There was dust; there was color; there was movement. And, at its head, rode Jeff Williams.

Curly Socks was going through his tricks. Bowing, kneeling, there in front of the grandstand. But the thoughts of Jeff Williams rested only half-heartedly on the antics of his stubborn mule. They were concerned with burly Matt Hawkins, with Tom Larkin, with Jackie.

And they were not pleasant. Hawkins was out to break Tom Larkin, break him financially. But young Tom was smart and Hawkins couldn't outsmart him; it looked as though young Tom would keep his ranch for Jackie.

But Jeff knew that Hawkins would get Tom; if he didn't get his ranch, he'd kill the young rancher. Hawkins was hard, he was tough—he had killed men back there on the owlhoot trail with less at stake than now.

Jeff frowned. When Hawkins would kill Tom, he would do it so that he himself stood clear in the eyes of the law. Jeff mulled with this thought and the idea that Hawkins would be riding pickup man. . .

Now a pickup man has a tough

job. There are two of them and they push their horses in on each side of a bucking bronc after the ten second whistle has blown. The rider on the right takes the hackamore rope from the bronc-kicker. The one on the left lifts the buckaroo from his saddle.

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Jeff saw, then, why Hawkins was riding pickup. Evidently he planned to drop Tom Larkin under the plunging hoofs of a wild bronc. Jeff's blood ran cold.

Working there in front of the grandstand, he watched a rider come out of the chute on a lineback buckskin gelding. The horse could buck, but he didn't have enough weight behind him to make a good bucker; the puncher rode him easily.

The ten second whistle blew. Hawkins and the other pickup man, a heavy muscled gent, came in. The other man took the hackamore rope; Hawkins took the rider from saddle. Jeff watched carefully, saw that Hawkins did his job well. He dumped the puncher to the ground while the other rider pulled the struggling bronc into the corral. The puncher walked past Jeff, cursing.

"A one day show," he said, "an' only one horse to ride. An' I draw a soft touch like that horse. Guess its me to make my dinero ridin' brahmas an' bareback."

"This banker," asked Jeff; "is he a good pickup man?"

"Done a good job on me. Why ask, Jeff?"

Jeff did not answer that. "What horse did Tom Larkin draw?"

"Smokey Curse," the bronc-kicker said. "Dang, he drawed the best bucker in the corral. The lucky dog."

THE PUNCHER stomped off, mumbling under his breath. And the scowl grooving Jeff's forehead

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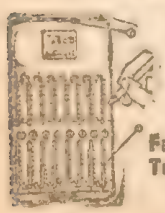

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grew. He jigged Curly Socks around, rode to where Tom Larkin squatted beside the bucking-corral, chewing a dried blade of grass and gossiping with some punchers.

"You got a bad horse," said Jeff.

"You win money on a bad horse," assured Tom.

"This banker goin' pick you up?"

Tom shifted and said, "I reckon so, an' I don't like the idear, Jeff. Him an' me ain't so friendly. . .if he dropped me—"

"Watch the snake."

Tom studied him. "What you an' the banker got atwixt you, Jeff?"

"He makes snake tracks."

A brahma steer threw its rider, loose rope and all. Jeff sent Curly Socks in, left the mule, bulldogged the steer. They hit the sod in a cloud of dust. Curly Socks trotted ahead, turned around and sat on the steer.

"Get up," ordered Jeff.

Curly Socks slowly stood up. Jeff released the steer, then made a run for the mule. The steer hooked him in the loose folds of his pants and Jeff hollered in make-believe fright. Then the steer galloped on, the hazers turning him toward the stock corral.

"Look out, Jeff," a man hollered.

Jeff turned quickly. For Smokey Curse, with Tom Larkin up, was coming out of the chute, bearing down on him. Swearing at himself, Jeff ran for Curly Socks. And while he flung himself on the mule he watched Tom Larkin make his ride.

Tom was up there, all right. Sitting his kak like a postage stamp. He hooked Smokey Curse five times high in the neck, then scratched high behind. And Smokey Curse was piling it on.

He was a big horse, and he had action. He also had a fighting heart. He sunfished, cat-walked, lunged. And all the time Tom Larkin sat up there grinning and riding.

Admiration tugged at Jeff's heart. Here was the hardest bucker of the day coupled up with the best bronc-kicker. The crowd was screaming its

applause. Dimly above the roar of voices and the squealing of Smokey Curse, Jeff heard the ten second whistle blow.

Hawkins and his companion rode through the dust and Jeff saw that Hawkins rode to the left, and he would be the one to pick Tom from saddle. Heart beating heavily, Jeff spurred Curly Socks forward, fear eating through him.

But he knew, even as he rode, that he was too late. Through the heavy dust he glimpsed the gaunt form of Hawkins, reaching out for Tom. And then the grandstand was silent, holding its collective breath in terror.

For Tom Larkin had seemingly slipped from Hawkins' grasp. Tom had fallen into the dust, and now Smokey Curse was on him. The brute had its ears back, his hoofs were flashing through the grime and dust.

And those hoofs were smashing down on Tom Larkin.

BOWELS working, Jeff rode Curly Socks in, driving the game little mule into the path of the crazed killer bronc. Curly Socks was tough; he laid his ears flat, and then he hit Smokey Curse.

The mule's solid shoulder smashed into the outlaw's rump and the blow turned Smokey Curse, jerked him away from Tom Larkin's supine body. The other pickup man, reaching in, grabbed the hackamore rope. He took his dallies and dragged Smokey Curse away.

Jeff hit the ground. Fear tearing at him, he knelt beside Tom Larkin. Curly Socks, thinking this was part of his act, sat down and brayed at the audience. But Jeff had no time for the wily brute as he bent over Tom Larkin.

Riders were coming on the run from the corrals. Somebody was hollering for the doctor. Hawkins dismounted, stood over Jeff. He said, "He slipped and I tried to grab him an'—"

Jeff snapped, "Can that talk, fella. You dropped him on purpose an' you know it!"

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Hawkins' eyes were muddy. "Jeff, it looks like I'll have to kill you. . . ."

Tom Larkin's eyes opened and he twisted around. Braced on his hands, he spat dust and blood. He started to cough suddenly, the sound heavy in Jeff's ears. Then Larkin sank down and lay still. The medico bent beside him. A hand grabbed Jeff's sleeve and he looked up into Jackie's terrified face.

"Jeff—is he—"

"Hush," murmured Jeff. "He'll be okay." Silently, ringed by punchers, they stood and watched the doctor complete his examination. The M. D. stood up.

"I'll have to get him to the hotel and to bed."

Jeff said, "Is he hurt bad?"

"I'll have to give a more thorough examination."

Somebody came up with the stretcher. They loaded the unconscious rider on it and carried him away. Jeff went back to Curly Socks. His heart was not in his work; it was with Jackie and Tom. And in his mind he ran over his problem.

He knew, now, that there was only one thing to do—and that was to kill Matt Hawkins. That thought rimmed his brain, colored his thoughts. For if he did not kill Hawkins, Tom Larkin would be gunning for the banker.

And then. . . .There was Jackie. Tom Larkin was no gunhand; he was only a rancher, a clean young gent. If he went up against Hawkins' gun Tom Larkin would be as good as dead. . . .And Jeff knew that Hawkins would want Tom Larkin to do just that.

Jeff viewed the situation from all angles. And found in it only bitterness and antipathy. For Hawkins had things as he wanted them now. He held all the cards. Tom Larkin, fired with anger, would recover, move against Hawkins. Hawkins would kill him and do it in self defense.

Jeff trotted Curly Socks over to

(Continued On Page 106)

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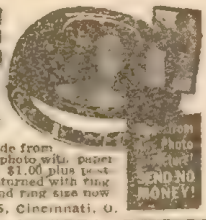

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(Continued From Page 104)

the corral. "Any news of Tom?" he asked a puncher.

"Yeah, doc just finished his examination. He's got some ribs busted an' his shoulder was knocked out of joint. Hurt internally some too, doc says."

"He still in bed?"

"Yeah, an' he'll be there for some time, too, I reckon."

Jeff thought, *That's good . . .you can't go gunnin' for a man when you're flat on your back in bed. . . .* Then another thought said, *Yeah, but Tom'll get well and then. . . .*

A BRONC-KICKER backed out on the wild-bronc race so Jeff, being the clown, had to ride the puncher's bronc. The horse made a twisting, lunging ride. Jeff sat him, baggy pants flapping, a battered grin twisting his scarlet mouth. He left him at the grandstand fence, hit the dust and walked off, leading Curly Socks.

He unsaddled his mule, hung the saddle up, fed the game little beast. Rigs and buggies were leaving and people were deserting the stands. The rodeo was over. The crowd was moving downtown for cool drinks and the street dance that would follow after chow time.

Slowly Jeff wiped the grease paint from his face. He sat and stared into the mirror, his thoughts heavy. His face cleaned to his satisfaction, he doffed his clown regalia, donned fresh linen and a black suit.

Now, a quiet, thin man, he moved to his trunk, opened the lid. He took out his guns. They were Colts .45s. Dark-steeled, glistening, they rested in their worn holsters. Copper rimmed bullets were stuck into the belt loads.

He looked at them, an ironical smile tugging his lips. Then fingers competent, he belted the guns on, tied down the holsters. He drew them a time or so and he was slow.

He went outside, stood scratching Curly Socks' long ear. He grained the brute and Curly Socks rubbed his velvety nose against his hand.

Jeff pushed him aside and turned down toward the town. Dusk was spreading across the range.

A cool wind came in, touched his cheek. He let this register on him and he had his thoughts. He met John Wilson, the bronc-kicker who'd won first money, in the Diamond Back saloon. The lanky rider looked at Jeff's guns.

"You ridin' on somebody's trail tonight, Jeff?"

Jeff ordered his drink. "Sure am, John."

Wilson stared. "You mean that, huh?"

Jeff drank.

"An' who," asked Wilson, "do you aim to salt down, Jeff?"

"That danged banker. He let Tom Larkin fall. He tried to kill Tom."

"That's fight talk," said Wilson.

Jeff smiled crookedly. "I reckon so, it usually is. If you see him, tell him to get his gun." His smile grew. "I took one from him. Still in my tent, but he should have another!"

"You gone loco? Hell, Tom Larkin—"

Jeff moved away into the crowd. He had taken the first step, now the weight seemed to have left his shoulders. Wilson had heard him, and others nearby had heard, and the word would get to Hawkins. Jeff moved to the corner.

Lights were coming into life around town. Kerosene lamps were sending yellow glow out on the sidewalks. A tall man, evidently a local townsman, was lighting the street lights by the aid of a small torch. Jeff turned and walked to the edge of town.

Standing there, he looked at the sky, drinking in the smooth approach of the encroaching night, watching the shadows lose their shade and become liquid darkness.

For some time he stood there, feeling all this and fighting his innermost battle. He turned as he heard boots behind him, his hands on his guns.

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came up. He looked at Jeff and said, "You're a hard man to find, fellow."

Jeff never took his hands from his guns. He figured this gent might be a friend of Hawkins'; the banker might have paid him to take on his quarrel.

"Maybe so. . . ." murmured Jeff. "You were lookin' for me, then? An' why?"

"Hawkins said he'd be waitin' in front of his bank."

Jeff nodded. "With guns?"

"Yeah."

"You work for Hawkins?"

The big man spat. "His money'd never buy me," he said disgustedly. "An' I'm not his errand boy. I was just goin' home this way an' somebody tol' Hawkins you'd headed this direction, so I tol' him I'd talk to you if I saw you."

Jeff said, "Thanks. . . ."

"Don't thank me," muttered the man. "He may kill you, clown."

The fellow turned, the night reached out and covered him. Jeff stood there for some time and listened to his retreating boots; then that sound died and only a lift of voices on Main street broke the night's silence. Jeff turned then and walked toward the bank. The irony of the situation struck him. Fate had pulled its strings: he was going to gunfight his old saddle pal because that man threatened his daughter's happiness. . . .

When he was walking in front of a store, Jackie stepped out and stopped him. "What madness is this?" the girl demanded. "What is this talk about you going against Matt Jones?"

JEFF scowled at the words *Matt Jones,* then remembered. He said, "He dropped Tom Larkin, girl; he tried to kill him."

Her fingers were strong. "But that's no reason you should go out with your guns. . . .Tom will get well. The doctor just told me so. . . ."

Jeff said, softly, "Please," and took her fingers loose. Now he was going down that street again. People

(Continued On Page 110)

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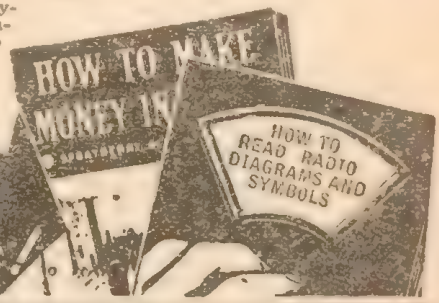

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(Continued From Page 108)

stood in doorways and under awnings and he heard a woman whisper, "Hush, Bill, don't ask so many questions." Though her voice was low, it was shrill and sharp.

Jeff loosened his guns. The bank was ahead—a dark outline of lumber against the rim of the sky—and he slowed his pace accordingly. One thought ran through him—the years had run their dreary cycle and now their culmination was in gunsmoke. . . .He lifted his voice.

"Come out," he said.

The voice came from across the street. Harsh, heavy, it rang across space. Hawkins said, "Turn aroun', fella!" and Jeff pivoted. Hawkins moved out of the shadows of a store and advanced. Jeff stood, boots wide; he waited, cold inside. Hawkins came on that way, and Jeff saw his face clearly now.

Jeff looked at him. His hands were dry; his fingers against the gungrips trembled. He licked his lips, eyes steady. Hawkins came on, then halted; he was ready, and the guns lifted and roared.

Now Hawkins' guns were out, red winking flares against the night. He was, Jeff saw, still very fast; Jeff did his best, but Hawkins had him bested. A bullet hammered out of space, dropped Jeff to his knees. Kneeling there in the dust, he triggered until his guns clicked on empty cartridges. Then he lowered the smoking Colts, and slowly climbed up.

Jackie came up. She grabbed his arm and asked, "Are you hurt, Jeff?"

He said, "A little." Most of the pain was inside him. He stood there and looked at Hawkins' inert shape and fought with his pain. He looked at a man and said, "Is he dead?"

The man knelt, said, "He's dead."

Jeff felt a little giddy. Something warm was creeping down the inside of his shirt. Something strong had a band across his lungs and made his breathing difficult. He knew then that he had some broken ribs. He put his arm around Jackie.

She was strong and young, her

(Continued On Page 112)

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(Continued From Page 110)

flesh solid. Jeff thought of that, thought of the years ahead—then he discarded that, she would never know. The days would soon swing back into their old order—there was a stampede at Wolf Point and a frontier show at Cheyenne—and they'd booked him and Curly Socks. And a man would have to go through them with a foolish smile on his lips and the comforting thought of two young people he had brought happiness to.

"Better get me to a doc," Jeff said.

(THE END)

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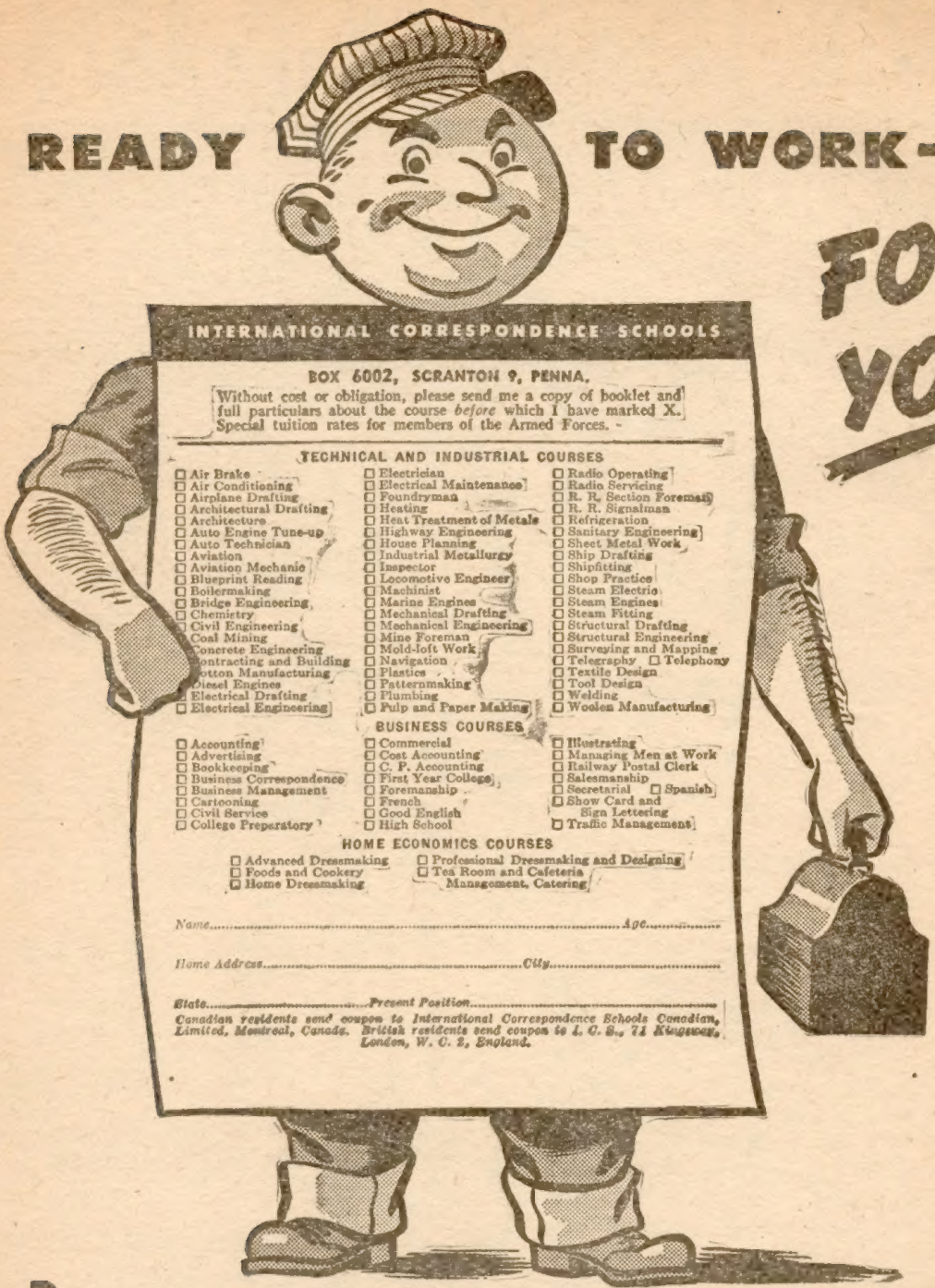

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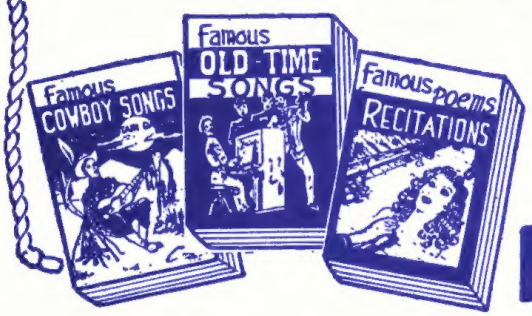

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